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SHARING THE “MAGIC”: EXPLORING THE PHENOMENON OF COMMUNITY
AND NATURE CONNECTEDNESS IN ANCESTRAL SKILLS EDUCATION

By

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Dissertation

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Sharing the "Magic": Exploring the Phenomenon of Community and Nature
Connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education

Chairperson: Martin Horejsi

An ancestral skill is a “first” skill that may have originally been used for survival purposes but is no longer considered by Western culture to be required knowledge for human survival. Ancestral Skills Education is a method of sharing this ancestral knowledge through participatory, informal learning practices, in non-competitive environments, and from a non-commercial perspective. Ancestral Skills Education has the potential to create an eco-centric feeling of connectedness for practitioners. After experiencing these feelings of connectedness, ancestral skills practitioners may increase their pro-environment and pro-community thinking and behavior. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to create a description of the community and nature connectedness experienced by ancestral skills practitioners, the shared characteristics of experiences that created feelings of connectedness, the shared path to experiencing this connectedness, and the effect this connectedness had on their daily lives. Participants identified specific qualities of ancestral skills experiences that led them to a feeling of connectedness. Three types of skills were delineated: survival, functional and spiritual. Survival skills could create an immediate feeling of connectedness to community and nature. Functional skills created a feeling of connection to nature, community, personal history and to the spiritual world. Spiritual skills were difficult to participate in without first having a feeling of connectedness to community, but ultimately created a deep connection to community. Ancestral skills gatherings were identified as models for effective Ancestral Skills Education.

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Sharing the "Magic": Exploring the Phenomenon of Community and Nature Connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education

It's a brisk September morning in Rexburg, Idaho. As you drive into the parking lot, you see cars of many makes and models. Some are brand new rental cars, recently driven from the Salt Lake City airport. Others are old, rusty, and seem like they hardly made the long drive from California, Texas and other far away states listed on their license plates. The parking lot is just a field, recently mowed, outlined and divided with some t-posts and rope. The roped off areas vaguely indicate where to, and where not to leave your car. You park in the field and walk into the event. As you look around, the size of a nearby house hints that the residents in this neighborhood are successfully chasing the American dream. You walk past the barn and through the gate. Signs of modern culture start to disappear. The houses are replaced by yurts, teepees and wall tents. People are sitting outside their tents, cooking, chatting and laughing. As you make your way into camp, you pass the Backtracks registration tent where a handful of people are deep in conversation. Then you come to the Mercantile, a tent-store where you can purchase items created by event instructors, everything from stoves to books about foraging. A handful of other vendors line the road, selling t-shirts, knives, books and handmade items. Some booths are unmanned as vendors are not worried about their items going missing. A few kids sit by the side of the road, trying to convince passersby to trade them something for their soap and other handmade items. Money is interesting to them, but a trade of a unique item is more tempting. In the distance, you hear the booming sound of a conch horn telling the camp that breakfast is ready. Everyone grabs their dishes and heads up to the kitchen tent for a communal breakfast. Lines form and volunteer servers make sure that everyone gets a fair first serving. A few hundred people

scatter across the lawn, finding groups of friends to sit with, or just sitting alone by the main fire and waiting for someone to find them. Soon, it will be time for morning announcements, then a day full of teaching and learning.

This is the Rabbitstick ancestral skills gathering, the oldest and one of the largest such gatherings in the world (Backtracks, LLC, 2014). This scene repeats itself every year in the third week of September, when people journey to the small town of Rexburg, Idaho, for a week full of sharing ancestral skills and creating community. Every year, I join this group of people from vastly different religious, political and socioeconomic backgrounds, as we gather together for an experience that can be life changing. At the very least, it is an opportunity to see past our differences and remember what we all have in common. Upon closer inspection, it may provide us with a model for education that fosters nature and community connectedness, necessary elements for a course correction in our increasingly anthropocentric world. One participant observed, “Everybody's here for the same reason. But there's a thousand different reasons we're all here.”

Many have never heard of a primitive (meaning “first”) or ancestral skills gathering and are unaware that these large gatherings take place in locations around the world. Steve Watts framed the skills (which he called primitive technology) taught at these gatherings in the following way:

No one is from nowhere. The blood of our ancestors flows in our own veins. Our aboriginal legacy is written in the very make-up of our bodies. The ancient caves and campfires of our pasts call to us from within. Primitive Technology is our inheritance as well. It is a world heritage which knows no race, creed, or color. It

is foreign to no one. It is the shared thread which links us to our prehistory and binds us together as human beings. (Watts, 1999, loc. 179)

Rabbitstick, the world's longest running gathering, began as Rabbitstick Rendezvous in 1975, under the leadership of Larry Dean Olsen and Richard Jamison. After a several year hiatus, it was revived by David Wescott in 1988 and has been an annual event ever since (Backtracks, LLC, 2014). The Rabbitstick website promises participants a choice of over 30 classes per day, with topics including:

Braintaning, Primitive Pottery, Felting, Useful Plants, Bows & Arrows,
Flintnapping, Traps Snares, Basketry, Altatls & Darts, Birch-bark Crafts,
Drumming, Fire by Friction, Pecking & Grinding, Food Gathering, Netting, Knife
Making, Primitive Games, Knife Sharpening, Finger Weaving, Tule / Cattail
Crafts, Shelter Building, Shoe and Sandal making, Drop Spindle Spinning, Stone
Axes, Willow Crafts, Earth Pigment Paints, Blow Guns, Wholistic Medicine,
Gourd Crafts, Backstrap Weaving, Cordage & Fibers, And Many More
(Backtracks, LLC, n.d.)

Through learning these skills and many others in an outdoor setting, the organizers of ancestral skills gatherings intend for students to develop their connection with each other and with the natural world (Bridges to the Past, N.D.; Fire To Fire, LLC, 2018). In their efforts to accomplish these goals, they recruit volunteer teachers who spend a week camping, teaching and learning with others. These teachers offer semi-structured and informal learning opportunities to students, transmitting information on a specific skill to a group of students with varied and often unknown prior knowledge. Students are able to choose classes that last anywhere from a half day to several days, selecting their own

level of immersion into a particular skill. Ancestral skills gatherings may be the most accessible form of Ancestral Skills Education (ASE) for the average person. Other sources of ASE include folk schools, outdoor survival schools, books and videos. Folk schools and outdoor survival schools have similar characteristics to ancestral skills gatherings. However, folk schools generally focus on craft, while survival schools usually focus on nature connection and survival skills. Ancestral skills gatherings bring all of these skills together in a single event, allowing students to choose from a full range of learning opportunities in a unique outdoor learning environment.

Ancestral Skills Defined

Burke and Ornstein's book, *The Axemaker's Gift* (1997), explores the development of tools and their role in the development of the human brain and body. They described the journey of hunter-gatherers as they moved throughout Africa 90,000 years ago and expanded into Europe, Asia and the Americas over the next 25,000 years. This feat could only have taken place with the assistance of tools and the development of the human brain in tandem with tool use (Burke & Ornstein, 1997). The ability of these humans to thrive in different environments was largely due to their skill at altering their environments through the use of those tools. Over time, they developed physical characteristics that assisted in their survival, including changes in their ability to absorb vitamin D (skin color). These changes created what we now call races, but were simply environmental adaptations (Burke & Ornstein, 1997).

Ancestral skills are those skills that helped our ancestors to quickly adapt to new environments as they migrated around the world. As people created their own cultures and societies, the skills and tools that they used became more and more specific over the

course of time, but the roots of most of these skills can be traced back to ancestors common to all people. Practitioners of ancestral skills point to the stone age as a time when all people shared a basic skillset. Skills like making points, building shelter and managing fire have been a part of human history for as long as we've been human. Burke and Ornstein (1997) posit that the act of flint knapping (making points by repeatedly and strategically chipping away at a stone), initially developed 90,000 years ago, required a complex form of communication as this knowledge was passed from one practitioner to the next. This skill and other complex making activities helped humans to develop language. Hunter-gatherer skills like foraging, trapping and hunting also shaped the human brain as they developed the skills to work together as a group, identify helpful and harmful plants, track animals and preserve food. Making twine for traps and nets, creating baskets and other carrying devices, and using animal skins for clothing all developed as parts of these early cultures and many of these skills and tools were universally practiced (Burke & Ornstein, 1997).

As groups spread and settled across the globe, ancestral skills and tools became regionalized. This specialization was fueled by environmental issues, like the regional availability of materials and the need for warmer clothing. It was also fueled by (and subsequently contributed to) the development of individual cultures, including the stories they told and the rituals they practiced. However, sharing still occurred and many ideas slowly spread across the world, taking hundreds or thousands of years to move from place to place. Over time, a basket can be recognized as the property of a specific people, based on the materials and techniques used to build it. The skills of each culture were

passed from one generation to the next, not by formal schooling, but by increasing participation in the community of makers (Lave & Wegner, 1991; Rogoff, 2003).

The process of Western industrialization and colonization forced cultures to abandon their traditional practices and participate in the Western ideals of capitalism and increased specialization (Rogoff et al., 2005). Over a short period of time, the way that humans had been learning, growing and thriving for tens of thousands of years radically shifted. In the United States, the industrial revolution rapidly changed society into a factory workforce and devalued the skills and the knowledge of older generations, while compulsory education simultaneously fostered an “American” identity that revolved around Protestantism, capitalism and individualism. In the early 1900’s, the antimodernist movement questioned the “rightness” of the industrial and technological path taken by the Western world. Some in that movement pointed to Ancestral Skills Education and the return of ancestral practices as a necessary course correction (Jackson Lears, 1994; Wadland, 1976).

A Brief History of Craft and Ancestral Skills Education

The history of craft and Ancestral Skills Education (ASE) is shaped by the intertwining paths of compulsory education and industrialization in the United States (Jackson Lears, 1994). A major early goal of the compulsory education movement was the enculturation of children to promote a Protestant morality, creating a nationalist and uniform society. Immigrant children were increasingly discouraged from speaking their language and participating in their cultural heritage (Katz, 1976). According to Katz (1976), early education reformer leaders like Horace Mann and Henry Barnard felt that

compulsory education was the solution to the issues created by urbanization, industrialization and mass immigration in the U.S:

In their view, free publicly supported common schools would unite Christian morality with democratic patriotism; the common school would stamp out the evils of ignorance, crime, vice and aristocratic privilege; and finally, the common school would not only assimilate the immigrants but also transform them into virtuous, productive American citizens. (Katz, 1976, p.15)

As urban schools were attempting to enculturate immigrant children by requiring compulsory attendance at local schools (Katz, 1976), Native American children were being taken from their families and sent to boarding schools for the same purpose (Cajete, 1994). Though Mann and Barnard asserted that a lack of a national (and Protestant) identity was the source of moral and social decay, some educational activists pointed to the loss of time in nature and the practice of their ancestral skills as the catalyst for these issues (Jackson Lears, 1994; Wadland, 1976). The progressivist movement of the early twentieth century recognized this issue and attempted reforms in the name of improving the now factory-centric education system. At the same time, an antimodern movement was also taking hold, lead by activists in powerful positions, questioning whether the direction of industrialization and urbanization was, in fact, progress (Jackson Lears, 1994; McCallum, 2005).

Over the course of the twentieth century, outdoor and ancestral craft programs were established to address society's ills and push back against the idea that industrialization was synonymous with progress. These programs introduced children and adults to skills and environments that were a regular part of life only a generation or two

before (McCallum, 2005; Wadland, 1976). Seton's Woodcraft Indians, a predecessor of the Boy Scouts of America and similar programs, began as an experiment in the spring of 1902. A group of students were shooting animals and breaking down fences on his Cos Cob farm, Wyndygoul, so Seton invited them to camp on his property and learn outdoor skills in hopes of improving their moral character (Wadland, 1976). Seton was a leader in the antimodernist movement and expressed a view of nature that is central to Ancestral Skills Education. According to Wadland,

Seton's intuitions regarding animal behavior linked the wilderness with morality. Because it perverted wilderness, technology also perverted morality. The inhabitants of the wilderness, whether man or animal, were united with it and were, therefore, either a priori moral or in the process of evolving toward an absolute moral state of grace. Civilized man must look to his birthplace in the wilderness to find his own moral peace. For morality was a balanced combination of instinct and learning premised on the survival, not of the individual, but of the individual within the community of all living things. Nothing which ignored this concept of community could be called moral. Nothing which ignored this concept of community would survive. (Wadland, 1976, p. 297)

Seton could be called the grandfather of the Ancestral Skills Movement, though due to politics and the progressive slant of our collective knowledge, his name is not well known (Wadland, 1976).

Another avenue for the growth of Ancestral Skills Education (ASE) in the United States was the introduction of folk schools in rural areas. The Arts and Crafts movement gained momentum in the early twentieth century, paving the way for folk high schools as

an alternative to the ever-expanding Western schooling system. In 1925, the John C. Campbell Folk School was established as a noncompetitive environment for teaching and learning Appalachian skills, based on the ideas of Danish philosopher Grundtvig (Totten, 2017). Grundtvig's philosophy promoted the idea that the skills and talents of people in a local area were an important part of their identity, and having this identity could drive them to become lifelong learners, better and more moral people, and contributors to their community (Totten, 2017).

The 1950's represented a tipping point in our urbanization, as the majority of people in the U.S. now resided in cities or suburbs (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002). The 1950s also marked the beginning of what is now known as the Anthropocene epoch. For the first time in history, humans became responsible for the course of the environment and the geological record (Trischler, 2016). In the 1960's, the Back to the Land movement demonstrated that a large population in the United States was aware of this shift in responsibility. For the first time since the early 1800's, rural areas began to grow faster than urban areas (Turman, 2013). The Back to the Land movement reflected the population's urgent desire to reacquaint themselves with their natural environment and cultural heritage. This movement also recognized a need to revitalize the small community and family groups that were being lost to urbanization. Participants were again driven by a need to find morality and connection through antimodern living (Turman, 2013). The Back to the Land movement established a cultural environment where the modern, industrial path was questioned, land-based living skills were revered and the American Ancestral Skills movement was established.

The beginning of the American Ancestral Skills movement can be traced to the work of Larry Dean Olsen. Olsen first taught an outdoor survival class at BYU in 1966 and later published the book *Outdoor Survival Skills* in 1968. Olsen is considered by many Western U.S. practitioners to be the father of the current ancestral skills movement (TJack Survival, 2017). He also went on to found the Rabbitstick Rendezvous in 1978 and to develop the concept for the first wilderness therapy programs (D. Wescott, personal communication, February 24, 2021; White, 2011). In the Eastern United States, Tom Brown popularized the ancestral skills movement with his 1978 book *The Tracker* and his field guides, documenting his knowledge of nature connection skills. Both Olsen and Brown promoted a primitive lifestyle, one which encouraged a more reciprocal and respectful relationship with a community that included man, plants, animals and all things in nature (Olsen, 2021; Walker & Brown, 2019). While these names remained on the fringe of mainstream culture, Richard Louv's 2005 book "Last Child in the Woods" brought nature connection back into focus with his claim that children were suffering from "nature deficit disorder". This prompted the 2006 No Child Left Inside movement, which once again popularized nature based, experiential learning in Western schooling. Fifteen years later, nature connection and ancestral skills remain a peripheral part of Western life, celebrated in magazine articles and blog posts, but not put into daily, regular practice.

This brief history of nature and craft education demonstrates repeated attempts to bridge the expanding gap between the fast-paced world of capitalism and the nature and community connectedness experienced by our ancestors. Even in the late 1800's, our country was in fear of losing their connectedness. "Nervous" conditions developed that

were directly linked to urban life (Jackson Lears, 1994; McCallum, 2005). According to Jackson Lears, “America was the most nervous country in the world because she was at the advance guard of modernization; other countries were becoming nervous to the extent they were Americanizing (1994, p.51).” Over 100 years later, authors like Louv are still pointing to a lack of nature connection as the root cause of many social ills and mental health issues, and pointing to nature connection as the key to curing these issues (Louv, 2008). In my literature review, I will further examine these ideas, along with the ever-present antimodern sentiment and its inability to create a firm stronghold in Western schooling, due to its democratic and decentralized nature. In the remainder of chapter 1, I will discuss the purpose and importance of the current study, and share my personal experiences with Outdoor and Ancestral Skills Education.

Purpose of this Study

In Louv’s 2005 mix of personal anecdotes, professional research and scientific data, he made the case that a disconnect from nature could be the cause for many of American children’s personal and social issues, as well as an overall fear of the natural world. His ideas were not new. He echoed voices from the past century, like Earnest Seton, Lloyd Sharp and Larry Dean Olsen, all of whom advocated for a return to an experiential relationship with nature (Olsen, 2021; Sharp, 1948; Wadland 1976). This book was the catalyst for the United States’ most recent push to get students back into natural settings, including the political “No Child Left Inside” movement. These leaders did not just talk about hiking in or adventuring through nature. They specifically discussed interacting with nature in a way reminiscent of our ancestors by participating in activities like building shelters, cooking over fires, hunting and gathering food. In the

case of Seton and other early leaders, a mistaken characterization of these as Indian ways, and his culture's tendency to over categorize Native American cultures into a single pan-Indian image of the "naive" and "primitive" American Indian, overshadowed the ancestral connection that these skills provide for all people (Wadland, 1976).

In a country where specific cultural traditions have been minimized by the uniformity of schooling (Cajetes, 1994; Katz, 1976), learning ancestral skills may provide an opportunity for connectedness to a broad range of students including those from non-dominant cultures (Cajetes, 1994; MacEachren, 2001). A lack of nature and community connection is cited by experts across multiple disciplines as a predictor of a range of issues including physical health problems, mental health issues, and environmentally unfriendly behavior (Louv, 2008; Mayer & Frantz, 2004). Ancestral Skills Education is an avenue for addressing these issues in a way that fosters a deep connectedness to nature and an understanding of humans as members of a nature community (MacEachren, 2001). Ancestral skills activities can be implemented in multiple environments, for multiple age groups, are non competitive and are rooted in traditions that can be traced back to through the cultural heritage of all people (Watts, 1999).

The purpose of this research is to explore the phenomenon of nature and community connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education. The remainder of this chapter explains the background, relevance and the need for this research, concluding with a brief overview of this study. Chapter 2 provides an in depth exploration of the existing literature. Chapter 3 outlines my methods and procedures as I conducted this transcendental phenomenological study. Chapter 4 presents a shared description of the experience of community and nature connectedness by participants in Ancestral Skills

Education. This description was distilled using a transcendental phenomenological approach. Chapter 5 discusses the results of the study, outlines opportunities for further research that stem from this shared description, and presents the limitations of this study.

Importance of this Study

The Anthropocene is defined as the epoch in which humans have been shaping the environment and the geological record (Trischler, 2016). While there has been some debate over when it began, the Anthropocene working group established its start as the 1950's (Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, 2019). This means that the current generation of parents raising children is only the first or second generation to have been raised in the Anthropocene epoch, where humans controlled the destiny of the world. In addition to being a geological concept, the Anthropocene is a cultural concept. People born in the Anthropocene epoch are increasingly disconnected from nature (Louv, 2008; Trischler 2016) and from each other (Louv, 2008; Young, 2020). "Anthropocentric" describes a human-first approach, a cultural shift towards placing the needs and wants of the immediate human population (though only those in industrialized nations) before the health of the earth (Trischler, 2016). In the 1970's, both the United States government and the United Nations realized that the Anthropocentric path of humankind was a potential ecological and social disaster.

In 1975, the Belgrade Charter was created by a group of UNESCO participants, outlining a global need for Environmental Education (United Nations Environment Programme, 1975). This document urged that:

We need nothing short of a new global ethic - an ethic which espouses attitudes and behavior for individuals and society which are consonant with humanity's place in the biosphere; which recognizes and sensitively responds to the complex relationships between man and nature and between man and man. (United Nations Environment Programme, 1975, p.1)

The call for a course correction was the catalyst for the addition of Environmental Education to the Western schooling agenda, with the goal of creating an environmentally aware population (NAAEE, 2010). However, with each passing day, our high tech culture becomes further entrenched in the anthropocentric viewpoint, distancing us from authentic relationships with community and the natural world (Pergams & Zaradic, 2006; Trischler, 2016). Due to the growing focus on test scores and specific academic content, it is increasingly difficult for educators to provide experiences for students that foster a deep connection to nature (Louv, 2008; Stone & Barlow, 2009). Louv (2008) coined the phrase "Nature Deficit Disorder" to describe the "human cost of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses" (p. 36).

Biophilia, a term coined by E.O.Wilson (1984), is a feeling of connectedness to the natural world. This connectedness is innately human, a requirement for our very survival for most of the history of humankind. It was weaved into the myth, spirituality and lifestyles of our ancestors, who saw themselves as part of the natural world (Orr, 1994). Research has tied this feeling of connectedness to a feeling of wellbeing (Pritchard et al., 2019) and a desire to engage in conservation and sustainable practices (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). The priorities of the Anthropocene era purposefully draw humans away

from a biophilic existence and towards biophobic existence. People spend as much as 90% of their time indoors (Evans & McCoy, 1998), pursuing the culturally driven goals of the Anthropocene: acquisition of wealth and consumption of material goods (Myers, 2000). The “modern” world encouraged this by the “sophisticated cultivation of dissatisfaction, which could be converted into mass consumption” (Orr, 1994, p.39).

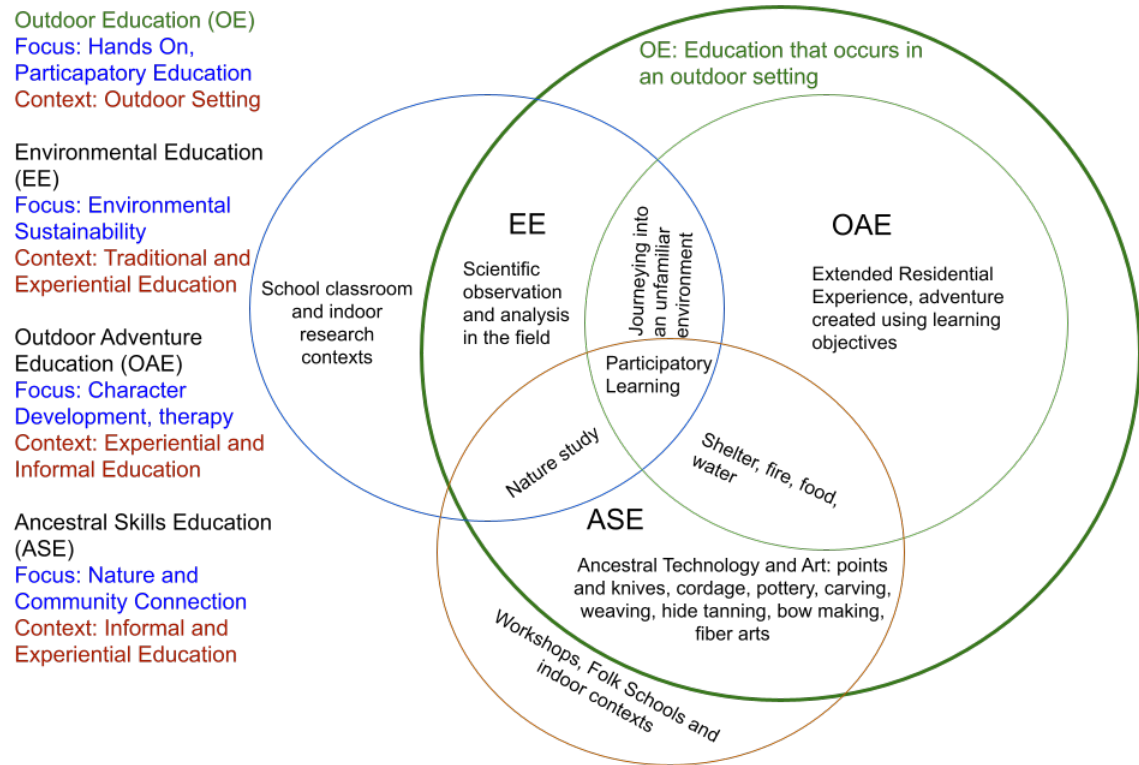
The Anthropocene has also ushered in a time where humans are disconnected from their neighbors, their communities and feelings of belonging to any particular group. Connectedness to community is a predictor of altruistic behaviors and personal happiness (Baumeister, 1995; Myers, 2000). Connectedness to our community and our natural places, a “sense of place”, roots us in the past and gives us direction for the future. A lack of connectedness means that there is no personal or community responsibility towards the person that was just wronged or the land that was just mistreated. As we move into the Anthropocene, we are shifting from a time when people became disconnected to a time when some people have never even experienced the feeling of connectedness. Education, our most effective form of cultural transmission (Rogoff et al., 2005), is the key to keeping people connected to this world so that they will make better choices for their local and global communities. Ancestral Skills Education is an avenue for creating a feeling of connectedness that has not been extensively explored or studied in academic literature. Only a handful of studies and dissertations were found that directly addressed Ancestral Skills Education. These studies are detailed in Chapter 2.

Environmental Education has been shown to increase connectedness to nature (Ernst & Theimer, 2011) and Outdoor Adventure Education has been shown to increase both connectedness to community and to nature (Breunig et al, 2008; Martin, 2004).

However, these fields have often promoted interaction with the environment through an anthropocentric lens (Ross, 2020). If we view nature in a human-centric way, then we need to preserve the environment for the good of people. If we are able to make the shift to eco-centric thinking, we are a piece of an environmental community and we need to contribute to that community in a positive way. Ancestral Skills Education directly challenges the anthropocentric narrative by fostering an eco-centric relationship between students and nature. Students learning ancestral skills don't simply get outside, they learn to see themselves as a part of a larger natural community. While studying and journeying in nature has been shown to make a difference for students, activities that remind them of their place in nature may be more effective at reversing biophobic and anthropocentric viewpoints (Sitka-Sage et al, 2017). Ancestral skills are taught in classrooms around the county, in informal nature connection groups, through school expeditions to outdoor learning centers, at folk schools, survival schools, skills gatherings and historical re-enactments. This study provides an important first step in studying the impact of Ancestral Skills Education in each of these contexts, as well as the unique learning environment created at ancestral skills gatherings.

Figure 1

A Proposed Model of Outdoor Education Including Ancestral Skills Education



My Story

The phenomenological research study begins with the intense interest of the researcher and the final structural understanding of the phenomenon is guided by the imaginative variation of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). Because of this relationship, the researcher must develop a very clear understanding of their own perspective and experiences. The researcher then goes through the Epoche process, listening to the stories of co-researchers and defining the horizons of their experiences without judgement (Moustakas, 1994). The Epoche helps the researcher to reduce bias and see the phenomenon for what it truly is. My story begins in childhood, as do many of the stories

told by my co-researchers. My story also talks about my experiences as a parent, as parenthood is my current phase of life. While my experiences do not qualify me to be a co-researcher in this study, my story provides the context for my interpretation of the experiences of my co-researchers.

As a child, the outdoors were my refuge, my safe space. Like many American children in the 1980s, I was sent out to play after early morning Saturday cartoons and told not to return until dinner time. My mom had a dinner bell, which could be heard from the neighbor's house. I roamed the neighborhood with a gaggle of friends, playing made up games and forming brief rivalries with other neighborhood friends as we all learned to navigate the social world. I attended summer camp in Maine, where I sailed, fished and learned to shoot a bow. At my summer camp, I was assigned to the Acuma tribe. We spent our summer competing against the Shoshone tribe. Throughout the summer, we would accumulate points for our tribe and one tribe would ultimately win. We gathered together every Sunday around a council fire, where we received patches to commemorate our successes. A camper could receive a third class, second class or first class badge in any activity, based on their accomplishments. The badges were patches that we wore on a sash, similar to Boy or Girl Scouts. At our council fire, I remember the chief (one of the camp directors) smoking a peace pipe and honoring the four directions before we began our ceremony. Then, some of the girls would be able to come up and receive their patches. If they got enough patches, they would be able to have a ceremony where they were promoted through the ranks. The initiation for our highest rank, our oldest girls, required them to paddle off in a canoe and spend the night outdoors by themselves. Seton's ideas were very present in my camp, and we did not live in a time

where these activities were even questioned. Now, these ideas would seem like cultural appropriation at best, overt racism at worst. However, these experiences sparked a feeling for me that the outdoors were magical and hinted that other cultures may have found true connection to the earth.

When I was 13, I went to a summer camp in Kelly, Wyoming. This was my first experience out in the west without my parents and I immediately fell in love. The scenery was majestic and the people were just nice. This was the first time I could remember someone holding the door open for me, just because. At my summer camp, I learned to sleep under the stars, how to build shelter and how to properly construct a fire. I prepared for survival by waterproofing matches, making fire starters, learning to whittle and what to pack (and not to pack) in a camping backpack. I remember the nights when I returned home from camp each year. My bed felt uncomfortable and often I would sleep on the floor. I would always cry that night, feeling like I had lost something that no one in my suburban world would understand.

As a teenager, I used to light campfires in my backyard. This does not seem like a strange activity to those who live in rural areas, but in my upper middle class suburban Connecticut neighborhood, this was not really a socially acceptable thing to do in your backyard. I was so proud of my ability to gather materials and set up a “one match” fire. Of all the skills I had, this one was by far the most satisfying to practice. Sometimes I would run through the woods and pretend that I was from another time. Once, when I was 14, I actually stumbled upon a historical re-enactment on one of my excursions. I sat and spied on the participants until they saw me and called to me. I did not answer them, just turned around and ran back to my school dormitory. There was a short time where I

thought I really had travelled back in time and I felt like everything was finally going to be ok, I was finally with people who were living in a way that made sense to me. Without anyone to really instruct me, my search for a better understanding of the natural world led me to read Tom Brown's field guides. I really didn't understand them, it was like I was reading a college textbook as a fifth grader, but they felt like the only connection I had to people who had a deeper relationship with the natural world. Sometimes it felt like I was two people, the part of me that was drawn to the west and the outdoors and the part of me that was trying to make my way in the real world.

I moved to Missoula, Montana when I was 19 because I felt like the west was calling me. I tried to spend as much time outdoors as possible, fishing, hiking and camping. In my 20s, I moved to an a-frame log cabin just outside of town. It was pretty run down and was right next to a highway, but to me, it was perfect. The cabin backed up to logging land and we were able to travel for miles without running into anyone. I hiked, atved and snowmobiled back in those mountains, following logging roads that led to the tops of mountains. We spent a lot of time camping, especially when I had kids. I worked as a software developer during the week, trying to juggle work and parenting, and we spent our evenings and weekends outside. As my kids grew, I wanted them to have similar outdoor experiences to the ones I had, even though they lived in a world where they were surrounded by technology.

When my sons were elementary school aged, we pulled them out of school and started homeschooling. My youngest was having a lot of trouble in school. He had been diagnosed with ADHD and we were faced with a decision. Either we needed to put him on medication or we needed to find a different way to educate him, because the

classroom was just not working. We started a homeschool co-op so that we could participate in activities with other homeschooling families. One year, a group of boys decided that they wanted to learn survival skills. We put an ad in Craigslist and Clark answered, letting us know that he was the right person for this job. Over the course of that year, Clark taught the kids so many of the skills that I had been hungry for in my childhood. They spent a few afternoons each week outdoors, playing awareness games, using knives, lighting fires and learning about how to interact with the world through ancestral skills. At the beginning of the second year of school, Clark felt that it was important to take a group of kids to Rabbitstick. I didn't really understand what it was, but Clark assured me that the kids would learn even more skills and would meet other mentors. My son came back from Rabbitstick and I could tell something was just different. He had made a connection. I decided that I needed to experience Rabbitstick as well. The next year, Clark and I went to Rabbitstick again, this time with a larger group of students, including my youngest son.

My Youngest Son's Rabbitstick Experience

"My name is Mato." he shouted, "That's Lakota for bear." He was probably the twentieth instructor to pitch his class in opening circle, but somehow his introduction is etched in my mind, a permanent memory of my Rabbitstick experience. I would later find out that his name was also Joshua and that he and I had a web of connections, beginning with the fact that we had both driven the five hours to Rexburg, Idaho from Missoula, Montana. Anyone who has attended summer camp knows the opening circle routine, instructors pitch their classes and students clamor to sign up for their favorites before they fill up. This was no different, but most of us were adults and this was a mid-

September Monday morning. He explained his class to the group, letting us know that he could teach students how to make bags and clothing out of hides. My twelve-year-old son tugged at my shirt and flashed me a grin. He was so excited because he had already signed up for this class on Sunday afternoon, just after we arrived. I was dubious because I couldn't remember the last time this particular child had focused on anything that wasn't a computer screen for more than an hour. This project seemed well out of his reach. We had some anxiety when we realized just how much a hide would cost, so we wandered through the makeshift booths and found a vendor who sold us a damaged hide for a discount. We added "learning to tan hides" to our list of things to do before next year's gathering and I bit my tongue as I handed over the money. I did not believe that my son would finish this project but I did not want to be the thing that stood in his way.

This was the third week in September and most kids were nearly a month into their school year. The kids that were running around at Rabbitstick, mostly homeschoolers, were in the ultimate classroom without walls. This was my first experience in a gathering of this nature. Experts from all over the world had assembled to teach a week of classes on just about every topic that related to primitive and person-powered technology. There were classes on herbal medicine, demonstrations of ancient watercraft and axe technology, and workshops where students made clothing, forged knives and weaved baskets. One group was constructing a log cabin with hand tools and another, a yurt. This was the type of experience I dreamt about whenever I took the kids to one of those living historical museum reenactments, staffed by enthusiastic volunteers. These were the people that I had been looking for as a teenager.

I walked my twelve-year-old to the tent where Joshua was teaching his class. I was taking a drop spindle spinning class across the field from him, something that I had long wanted to learn but had never made the time for. I showed him where I was going to be, fully expecting to see his “I’m bored” face before lunch time. Lunch rolled around and I had to go back to the tent to retrieve him. “You’ll need to eat,” I said. He reluctantly followed me back to our campsite and sat down for lunch. After he ate, he asked me if he could go back to class. He worked clear until dinner, not making the progress of the adults in his group, but remaining focused for the entire day. The next day, I took a felting class in the tent across the way from my son. He came over to see me a couple of times, offering a hug and a kiss. This time, and for the next three days, he chose to eat his lunch at the tent, while he worked.

As I watched him that day, I thought back to his second grade year, when I had been called in one-too-many times for his out-of-control behavior. He stood on tables, he refused to do his worksheets, he yelled at his teacher. Maybe, they said, he needed medication for ADHD, and he needed an IEP, and he needed a therapist. My son was drowning in the classroom and the prescribed rescue involved more boundaries, more discipline and more sitting. We pulled him out of school in second grade, valuing his self-esteem and happiness over his ability to sit still. We let him run and play. We helped him feel good about learning through activities like cooking and playing Minecraft together. After a brief attempt at “school at home”, we rarely asked him to sit still. But this boy, five years later, finally sat still.

He worked for the entire week, taking breaks when he was tired of focusing, then returning to his work with newfound determination. At one point, I met Joshua on the

road between the campground and the class tents. He told me that my son was a really unique kid and that he thought it was an exceptional thing for a twelve-year-old to show that much dedication to a process. He never knew just how much that meant to me, and I'm sure he did not realize that this was the first time someone had said those words about my son. It was this moment I realized that my son was able to sit still, he just needed to find something that he was passionate about. It was just by chance that we experienced such a thing when we found ourselves at a primitive skills gathering in Rexburg, Idaho.

I'd love to say that this story ends with my son wearing his amazing hide backpack every day and that I now know that he has a future as a skilled craftsman. Actually, the dog ate it. Yes, after a week of focus, effort and determination, he left his almost-finished project on his bedroom floor, just a few days after we returned from Rabbitstick. Deer hides are like hot fudge brownie sundaes to dogs, so that thing didn't stand a chance. When we saw what happened, we both cried. He was devastated and I was afraid that he would never again find the joy of learning he had experienced in Joshua's class at Rabbitstick. He swore off ancestral skills for about a month, but then he bounced back. This was miracle number two in my Rabbitstick experience. Not only did my son accept the natural consequences of leaving the bag on his floor, but he began working as a mentor in an ancestral skills class for younger kids.

My Rabbitstick Experience

Two years ago, in September, I made a hat. It was not a great hat, but a hat nonetheless. Jean, my instructor, was an expert on crochet, the lead teacher of a kids program with 40 plus students, and a supplier of natural tinctures, formulated for

everything from headaches to depression. She was a well-respected instructor at Rabbitstick and on this day, I was one of 4 students who had come to learn from her. We began by sorting through color options in a bag of wool. Jean had dyed the wool before the gathering, using rit dye to create many bright, colorful options. The wool came from her neighbor's sheep, another family that was at the gathering and shared her passion for ancestral skills. We went through the process of creating roving from the batts of wool, then crocheting a hat directly from the roving. Jean gave me a quick crochet tutorial and then sent me fumbling on my way. As we worked, we talked about everything from our opinions on education to our religious background, both common themes for conversation at the gatherings. Small talk didn't seem like an option, the conversations were deep and thoughtful. All opinions were respected and evidence was presented to support ideas without being confrontational or dismissive. It was clear that we valued each other's ideas, but came with very specific, strong viewpoints. When we didn't have anything important to say, we quietly worked on our projects, Jean included.

I was the only person in the group of four who had no prior experience with crochet and it showed. One by one, the students finished up their hats and a few hours passed by. Jean let me know that it was time for me to move on from her shelter when the others had all gone and my hat was about half way finished. I asked if I could buy the crochet hook that I was using and she sold it to me so that I could head back to my camp and finish my hat. The next day it rained, so I took advantage of that time, sitting under a shelter and slowly adding on to my wool hat. I finished the hat after about 8 hours of work and improved my crocheting skills exponentially in the process. The pride that I felt in that hat was almost embarrassing, as it was such a simple item that I could have easily

purchased at any store. This winter, I wear that hat almost exclusively. Every time I put it on, I feel a connection to Jean, to the sheep, to that gathering and to the world. Through the process of making this hat, I have gained a deeper understanding of my connectedness to the world.

While my story is obviously much longer, I've presented the reader with glimpses into moments in my life when I experienced connectedness to nature and community through ancestral skills activities. My story may also shed some light on the complexities of the current discussion of cultural appropriation. The activities from my childhood were not acceptable by today's standards, but did create a reverence for Native American culture and a yearning for the kind of connection experienced by Indigenous cultures. The same connection was created for my son by sewing a tanned hide into a backpack, an activity that may be considered to be cultural appropriation by some. I will revisit the idea of cultural appropriation in chapter 2, discussing the literature on cultural appropriation and the efforts by the ancestral skills community to navigate this issue.

Research Question

What is the shared experience of nature and community connectedness for participants in Ancestral Skills Education?

Subquestion 1: What are the shared characteristics of ancestral skills experiences that helped them to feel this connectedness?

Subquestion 2: Are there shared paths to a feeling of connectedness?

Subquestion 3: How has connectedness changed their relationship with the environment and community?

Definitions

Connectedness: A feeling of belonging to and responsibility towards a particular group or place.

Ancestral skill: A “first” skill that may have originally been used for survival purposes, but is no longer considered by Western culture to be required knowledge for human survival. Survival includes the formation and preservation of cultural practices through music, games, stories and traditions. While specific skills may have a specific cultural origin (for example; a way of making baskets or of making bows, the stories and songs of a specific people), when generalized (fire technology, hunting technology, shelter technology, storytelling), these are skills that were practiced by each of our ancestors at different points in human history. Ancestral skills might also be called primitive skills, bushcraft, stone age skills, land based living skills, survival skills, or folk skills.

Ancestral skills gathering: An event organized for the purpose of teaching and learning ancestral skills. These events invite participants to camp together for multiple days and participate in classes and mentoring opportunities offered by more experienced practitioners. Ancestral skills gatherings are based on community cooperation, idea sharing and mutual support. They are not centered around a marketplace and while selling does take place at these events, they are generally non-commercial in nature.

Methodology

This research study followed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design. The phenomenological approach was selected due to the limited academic research on the topic of Ancestral Skills Education. In the summer and fall of 2020, I recruited ten volunteer participants who were practitioners of ancestral skills. These participants shared their stories in open ended interviews that lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours. The interviews were then analyzed using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological approach. A description of the experience of community and nature connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education was distilled. In chapter 3, I will present a detailed description of this study.

Conclusion

In this qualitative phenomenological study, I distilled the essence of nature and community connectedness in ancestral skills education by collecting and analyzing the accounts of ancestral skills practitioners. According to Moustakas, the phenomenological research question is sparked by the researcher's intense interest in the topic. Moustakas goes on to say, "The researcher's excitement and curiosity inspire the search. Personal history brings the core of the problem into focus" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104). It took months to establish a topic for this research. I visited with my advisor countless times to hone in on a topic. We were circling around the idea of Ancestral Skills Education, but I could not justify the importance of a study and there was very little literature to build on. I thought about my own experience with Ancestral Skills Education. What did I gain from it and why was it important? Nature and community connectedness were two themes that continually returned to my thoughts. It was not just about the skills, it was about how the skills directly affected the way I felt about and acted in the world. Did

others have a similar experience? Would it be possible to arrive at a shared description of this phenomenon? When I decided to research this topic, it was with no understanding of Indigenous ways of teaching and learning, the history of Western schooling in the U.S., or the efforts of so many to revive tradition within the context of increasing industrialization. In chapter 2, I share the historical context for ASE, the history of Ancestral Skills practices in the United States, Indigenous foundations of the current research and a brief discussion of the debate over cultural appropriation.

Chapter 2: Supporting Literature

Community and nature connectedness have been studied extensively in the past 30 years. Schultz et al. (2003) defined connectedness to nature as a spectrum, ranging from those who feel superior to the plants, animals and the laws of nature to those who feel that they are a part of the natural world, with an obligation to participate as an equal to animals and plants. Baumeister introduced community connectedness as the “need to belong” and noted that this need is so intuitive that Maslow included it in his hierarchy of needs prior to having any supporting empirical evidence (Baumeister et al, 1995). In both cases, connectedness is implicitly demonstrated by actions and perceptions and not necessarily simply by statements of connection (Baumeister et al, 1995; Schultz et al, 2003). Connectedness is a strong predictor of helping behaviors, mental health and environmentally sound choices (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). Educational experiences that enhance both nature and community connectedness can be beneficial for students, their communities and the places where they live by meeting this fundamental human need (Louv, 2008; Young, 2019). In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of the related literature on nature and community connectedness. I will then discuss the effects of

Western schooling and industrialization on our overall feelings of connectedness. Next, I will detail attempts to address this disconnect through experiential and outdoor education. Finally, I will discuss the current literature in ancestral skills education and address the debate over cultural appropriation.

Jon Young, a seminal author in nature connection, turned to the San Bushmen, one of the oldest Indigenous cultures in the world, to understand their perception of the relationship between nature and community connectedness:

We build threads with all the beings around us, the birds, the animals, the trees, and over time with the stars, with the moon and with each other as human beings, with our ancestors and with the unborn and those threads grow thicker and thicker with every interaction, with every observation, with every question, with every story that we tell to each other about what we've seen, what we've learned and what we've experienced and eventually those threads grow thicker and thicker until they become ropes. (Young, 2019, 5:35)

In his 2019 Ted Talk, Young uses the ancestral skill of making cordage to highlight the San people's incorporation of nature and community connectedness into their daily lives. While both nature and community connectedness have been studied extensively in recent years, there is evidence of a reciprocal relationship between the two that warrants further study (Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Young et al, 2018). In their development of the Connectedness to Nature scale, Mayer and Frantz asserted that true nature connectedness required the participant to see themselves as a part of the natural community (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). To Young, nature and community connectedness are not only fundamental needs, but are innate human abilities that must be activated and cultivated (Young, 2019).

He developed his 8 Shields Origins project after spending years learning from the San and other Indigenous cultures, in order to help people remember how to form deep connections with nature and community (Jon Young, Connection First Network, n.d.).

Even when these abilities aren't recognized, humans will find a way to meet these needs (Louv, 2008; Myers, 2000; Young, 2018). Myers points out that "Out of our need to define a "we" come loving families, faithful friendships, fraternal organizations, and team spirit, but also teen gangs, isolationist cults, ethnic hostilities, and fanatical nationalism" (Myers, 2000, p.62). This need to connect is a guiding force and can lead to helping or harming behaviors, depending on how we apply it (Myers, 2000; Yang et al., 2014). Baumeister and Leary (1995) found that the need to belong actually drove the development of human culture. A human need for nature connection could be also framed by Baumeister and Leary's 1995 definition of a fundamental need to belong (Hurley & Walker, 2019; Mayer & Frantz, 2004). In order to understand how Western culture moved us from the San people's placement of themselves as a part of a natural community to the anthropocentric view of humans as separate and competitive controllers of nature, it is important to review the history of the American move towards urbanization, industrialization and compulsory education beginning in the 1820's.

What we commonly refer to as "education" should more properly be called "Western schooling" (Cajete, 1994; Illich, 2013; Rogoff, 2003). Our accepted version of schooling was imported from Prussia in the 1850s, developed into a compulsory American social institution, and subsequently transmitted to other cultures through empire building and attempts at humanitarian aid (Black et al., 2010; Rogoff, 2003). Western Schooling slowly took the place of informal, community and family based

education early in the history of the United States, beginning in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (Katz, 1976). Prior to 1647, it was the responsibility of parents and masters to educate children and apprentices. In 1674, Massachusetts established a law that any town with more than 50 families would be required to establish a formal community school. However, most of the learning continued to happen in a family and community setting until the mid-eighteen hundreds (Katz, 1976).

From 1820 to 1860, American cities grew from housing 6% of the population to 15% (Katz, 1976) and a large workforce emigrated from Europe. Fear of a declining standard of morality and the expanding cultural rifts between different nationalities prompted Horace Mann and officials in Massachusetts to implement a common school system modeled after the Prussian school system. The aim of this controversial movement was to promote Protestant morality, normalize acceptable American cultural ideals and teach a common language (Katz, 1976). An important piece in this quest to develop a purely American identity was the introduction of the first compulsory schooling law in 1852 (Katz, 1976). While the system was promoted as providing equal opportunity and free education for all, some saw it as an attempt to indoctrinate, control and homogenize the population. One objector, who had first-hand experience with the Prussian system exclaimed, “The real object of the Prussian common-school system is, to teach children and to impress upon their minds that they must obey their king. Everything else is made to tend to this“ (Thayer, 1856). This massive experiment in enculturation ran parallel with the dark history of American Indian schooling. The Carlisle School opened in 1879, beginning the compulsory boarding school era that attempted to demolish Indigenous ways of life in the U.S. (The Carlisle Indian School Project, 2020). These

efforts were fueled again by the misguided notion that adopting an American identity would assimilate the Native American population into American society. At Carlisle, their goal was to “kill the Indian, save the man” (The Carlisle Indian School Project, 2020). The development of American schooling that occurred in the mid to late 1800s was guided by efforts to fix perceived contemporary social ills without regard for the long term consequences for individual cultures and overall connectedness (Adams, 1988).

This way of thinking set the stage for a nearly 200 year drift from a system of education rooted in culture, community and interaction to one of superiority, rightness and disregard for our communities and our environment (Illich, 2013). This dissertation references several authors who contrast the American way of educating with the Indigenous way of educating. However, this comparison is based on a very recent history of compulsory schooling, not an inherently American tradition (Katz, 1976). Western schooling could be considered to be a social control placed on all people, particularly those from the non-dominant culture, that inhabited the United States in the eighteen hundreds (Illich, 2013; Katz, 1976). Multiple attempts to reform education followed in the next hundred years, but the American system of education only grew to be more separate and alienating to students from non-dominant cultures over time (Cajete, 1994).

Schooling and culture have a reciprocal relationship, ensuring that the goals and methods of Western education are informally transmitted to children in Western culture long before they even attend Kindergarten, prioritizing preparation for school over preparation for life (Rogoff, 2003). According to Cajete’s 1994 analysis, the goals have not changed much since Thayer’s objection in 1855. Schooling transmits “academic skills

and content that prepares the student to compete in the infrastructure of American society as it has been defined by the prevailing political, social and economic order“ (p. 18). Essentially, we are still trying to teach children that they must “obey their king”, and increasingly engage them in our consumerist culture (Cajete, 1994; Illich, 2013). In the 2010 documentary *Schooling The World*, one interviewee describes the effect of Western schooling on her small, Indigenous community:

Before modern schooling, our education focused on spiritual teachings. But now the emphasis is on material success. People go to school so they can make a lot of money, have a big house, drive a nice car. The whole idea of learning has been turned around to mean “How can I make a lot of Money?” (Black et al., 2010)

In his discussion of happiness, Myers (2000) contrasted our cultural pursuit of a higher paycheck with data showing that aside from abject poverty, money does not have a positive impact on happiness. Students, however, are increasingly pursuing higher education simply for the purpose of making more money. While Western schooling has been introduced across the globe with the stated goal of educating the population, its unstated goals of promoting Western capitalism and culture may prevent the world from achieving the goals of the Belgrade charter.

In *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*, Barbara Rogoff tells us, “The most difficult cultural processes to examine are the ones that are based on confident and unquestioned assumptions stemming from one’s own community’s practices” (Rogoff, 2003, p.11). Young (2018) describes culture as “the water that every individual swims in as they grow and develop.” (p. 63) Because schooling has played such a formative part in each of our lives, it is difficult to validate ways of teaching and learning that fall outside

of the Western schooling model. Thus, in the history of our country, many educational reformers have tried and failed to make a lasting impact on the form and function of our schools (Resnick & Hall, 1998). One important distinction between ideas that were integrated and those that were not is the underlying progressive or anti-modernist philosophy of those ideas. Those who espoused that progress was synonymous with capital gain and increasing productivity were able to promote their ideas into a lasting place in American culture. Those who questioned the value of “progress” and advocated for a pause to examine the benefit of this direction were often disregarded and categorized as having outdated, Romantic ideas (Jackson Lears, 1994; Wadland, 1976). However, even the progressive ideas that are persistent in the curricula of teacher education programs are not always present in the core routines of Western education (Resnick, & Hall, 1998). These ideas are more commonly put into practice in alternative environments, like outdoor education. Experiential education as defined by Dewey, Lewin and Kolb, has been established as the pedagogy for outdoor education and continues to heavily influence outdoor education (Loynes, 2018). This is largely because it provides a framework for outdoor educators to align outdoor experiences with the expectations and evaluation processes of Western schooling, using Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (Ord & Leather, 2018).

As a field of practice, outdoor education has been shaped to fit within the familiar structure of Western education: specific and measurable learning goals are established by the educator, an environment or situation is carefully crafted in which to meet those goals and students are evaluated on how well those goals are met (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014; Loynes, 2018). At its core, outdoor education (including aspects of environmental

education and outdoor adventure education) embraces the anthropocentric notion of progress. However, Ancestral Skills Education, often a component of outdoor education experiences, involves participatory and informal education practices including experiential learning (not necessarily through “well crafted” experiences), guided participation, apprenticeship and storytelling. As these methods of teaching and learning fall outside the generally accepted practices of Western schooling, they have received less attention in the literature. Results of ASE are difficult to measure and therefore investment difficult to justify, when viewed through the lens of progress.

Studying such a phenomenon is difficult, because it falls so far outside what we culturally believe to be “education” (Rogoff et al, 2005). Western schooling has trained us to look for specific, measurable qualities, so the question in education is often, “How do we improve test scores?” In this dissertation, I invite the reader to step outside of that narrow view of education and examine education from a non-western and historically Indigenous perspective. Then, the question becomes, “How can people happily live in and contribute to their environmental community?” In fact, this is the same question that the world asks on a higher level, once we get past the global competition for countries to have the “best” education system. The Belgrade Charter calls for a “new” global ethic, one that “recognizes and sensitively responds to the complex relationships between man and nature and between man and man.” (United Nations Environment Programme, 1975, p.1) However, knowing the brief history of Western Schooling in the United States, this might actually be called a return to a non-industrial global ethic. Evaluating the effectiveness of ASE on students, teachers, and the learning environment, may require us

to step out of our own cultural proclivities and embrace a more universal definition of teaching and learning.

Culture does not develop in a vacuum, it develops out of the perceived needs and desires of people. The development of culture then shapes the perceived needs and desires of people, creating a reciprocal relationship (Rogoff, 2003). Some needs can be seen as fundamental, evolving millions of years ago, and others began to take shape 12,000 years ago as the human population expanded over the earth (Burke & Ornstein, 1997). Over time, technology, skills and ideas developed regionally into the traditions that defined separate cultures (Burke & Ornstein, 1997). For example, hunting technology evolved through expanded strategies and game, variety in point sizes and shapes, and varied ways of throwing those points (Pétillon, 2015). Our connection to fire helped us to develop the technology to eventually have pocket sized flint, steel and fuel in tiny, self-contained lighters (Wisniak, 2005). Ideas followed a similar evolution to technology, shaping systems of human organization and education that were then shaped by those systems of organization and education. Over a brief 200 years, as compared to the millenia long history of Indigenous teaching and learning, the culture of American schooling grew from a desire (and perceived need) to unify our country into a force that controls the ecological and psychological destiny of our world. Through colonization, Western schooling moved through the rest of the world in attempts to convert those cultures to the same value system deemed important by Western society (Rogoff, 2003). This is a practice that continues to this day, as Western schooling has been promoted around the world as a model of progress, which proponents claim Indigenous cultures should embrace in order to join “modern” society (Black et al., 2010; Rogoff, 2003).

Methodologies of ASE

The participatory and informal education practices of Ancestral Skills Education (ASE) have been explored in Western education since the progressive era and are often employed in outdoor education programs. The framework for outdoor education is experiential and community based learning, popularized by John Dewey in the progressive education movement and informal learning, first introduced in Western education by Josephine Brew. Even though these ideas are simply Westernizations of Indigenous ways of teaching and learning, a great deal of educational research has been conducted on their use in outdoor education settings, which could be applicable in a non-Western environment. In addition, practitioners of ASE integrate guided participation, apprenticeship and storytelling as they pass their knowledge from one person to the next. These ideas should be acknowledged as human traditions, the oldest forms of teaching and learning, regardless of their absence in our current schooling system.

John Dewey, a leading figure in the progressive education movement, called for a return to experiential education as the primary way of transmitting knowledge (Dewey, 2015). Dewey, like other progressive educators of his time, worried about the effects of industrialization, automation and specialization on the character and independence of youth (Dewey, 2015). Dewey observed that the shift from the household to the factory as the center for sustainability, was producing a generation of children who were alienated from their culture and their history. These students were able to get light by flicking on a switch, or purchase food without having to grow and harvest it. Their clothing was no longer produced at home and items like furniture that were once produced in a transparent and local way were now mass produced in factory settings, away from the

eyes of children (Dewey, 2015). Dewey called for a return to experiential education, stating in his pedagogical creed, “I believe that the only way to make the child conscious of his social heritage is to enable him to perform those fundamental types of activity which makes civilization what it is” (Dewey, 2015, pp.10-11). As an example of this practice, Dewey created opportunities for his students to learn the entire process of refining fiber from shearing the animal to weaving the yarn. Central to Dewey’s philosophy was the view of school as a community, a simplified and relatable form of the community in which students lived (Dewey, 2015). For Dewey (2015), connectedness to their own peer group and to their community was the foundation of effective moral education. While many of Dewey’s ideas for child centered, interest-based education are regularly re-introduced in our Western schooling system, his emphasis on the role of traditional craft is often overlooked.

While leaders in the outdoor education and particularly the outdoor adventure education industry point to Dewey as the foundation for outdoor educational pedagogy, many of their practices actually make use of a version of Kolb’s model of experiential learning (Warren et al., 2008). This cycle moves from concrete experience to reflective observation to abstract conceptualization to active experimentation. Kolb proposed that learners could begin anywhere on the cycle, but must complete the cycle for a true experiential learning experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Kolb’s theory was heavily influenced by Dewey, but was also influenced by the work of Lewin, Freire and Rogers. Lewin introduced the idea that the learning process not only relied on the learner, but on a holistic understanding of the learner’s life experience. In addition, Kolb integrated Dewey’s concept of democracy in education, Freire’s idea of dialog among equals as an

environment for learning, and Rogers' concept of deep experiencing (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Kolb's model of Experiential Learning, later simplified by Neill to "Do, Review, Plan", does not adequately address all of the learning that takes place in an outdoor setting, nor does it really capture the nuances of learning in the outdoors (Ord & Leather, 2018). Dewey, Kolb, and subsequent scholars in the field of Outdoor Education emphasized the role of careful planning on the part of the educator to ensure that learning goals are met (Ord & Leather, 2018). However, many of the learning experiences that happen in this setting may happen while chatting by a campfire, cooking dinner or playing games (Ord & Mallabon, 2018; Cooper, 2018). These experiences offer opportunities for informal education, as proposed by Brew and refined for Outdoor Adventure Education by Leather (2018).

Informal education is defined by Jeffs (2018) as a method of reaching overarching goals using unplanned scenarios and unstructured time. Josephine Brew first proposed the use of informal education in Western schooling and other contexts in her 1946 book *Informal Education; Adventures and Reflections* (Jeffs, 2018). Dewey acknowledged the importance of informal education in the transmission of our culture and cautioned against the trend to rely solely on formal schooling to define how and what children learn (Dewey, 2015). Both Rogoff and Kolb observed these practices first with families, outside of schooling environments. Kolb stated, "The relationship between parent and child is the primal educational relationship and forms the model from which other forms of educating have evolved" (Kolb & Kolb, 2017, loc. 347). If informal education and participatory education are the first ways that parents teach their children and are present

in all cultures, regardless of the introduction of Western schooling (Rogoff, 2003), it may be seen, like the ancestral skills discussed in this dissertation, as a “shared inheritance”.

Rogoff (2003) expands Brew’s definition from transmission of information through discourse to transmission of culture through guided participation. In her research on young children in Western and non-Western cultures, she found that even in cultures where schooling is considered to be the prevalent form of education, parents of young children still use guided participation to prepare their children for the experience of school (Rogoff, 2003). Rogoff found that the two processes of guided participation, “mutually bridging meanings and mutually structuring children’s opportunities to learn—take distinct forms in different communities while retaining their centrality everywhere” (Rogoff, 2003). She not only noticed this in small children, but in adults as they apprenticed as weavers in Guatemala or learned crafts through the *uchideshi* system in Japan (Rogoff, 2003). Cajete (1994) notes that Indigenous education “recognizes that true learning occurs through participation and honoring relationships in both human and natural communities” (p.29). While Rogoff’s findings and Cajete’s experience have similar characteristics to the foundations of Experiential Education first presented by Dewey, they expand the boundaries of an educational experience and allow educators the freedom to plan less and participate more, modelling the skill or behavior that they would like to teach (Leather, 2018).

Lave and Wenger (1991) would describe the type of learning environment found at ancestral skills gatherings as a community of practice. These communities, made up of elders, mentors and newcomers, allow for newcomers to peripherally participate in the activities of the community, increasing their participation as they increase skill and

interest. Lave and Wenger cite several examples of this type of participation that fall on the outskirts of Rogoff's guided participation, as the mentors involved do not necessarily plan or think out the training of the newcomers (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning in this way is accomplished through assimilation into a culture, not necessarily the transmission of information from one person to another. At ancestral skills gatherings, students move from being newcomers and experiencing a number of skills, to specializing in a skill and becoming a mentor, to their final place as an elder. As they learn and grow, they become full members of a community, contributing to the growth and education of other members (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The Origins of Ancestral Skills Education in the United States

In the early 1900s, social and educational reform movements developed two distinct paths. One was progressivist, promoting reforms that were aligned with the anthropocentric, individualistic, wealth seeking drive of American culture, and others were anti-modernist, questioning the correctness of the path towards industrialization and urbanization. Progressivists were well organized and politically supported. Anti-modernists, while often speaking from prominent positions in American society, were decentralized with their efforts to promote change, winning victories on the local level and peripherally steering the course of progress on a national and global level (Jackson Lears, 1994; Wadland, 1976). The progressives made a lasting (though still somewhat peripheral) mark on our system of schooling, promoting ideas that are still accepted and shared in teacher preparation programs (Resnick, & Hall, 1998). While Environmental and Outdoor Adventure Education can trace their roots to the progressive education movement, anti-modernist advocates like Ernest Thompson Seton were highly influential

in their implementation. Seton's own anti-modernist, craft-based movement, however, was at best distorted into a Romantic appropriation of "Indianness" and at worst, forgotten completely (Wadland, 1976).

Ernest Thompson Seton's Woodcraft movement was the first large scale European American effort to re-introduce ancestral survival skills into Western culture. Seton's Woodcraft Indians, an organization that inspired and shaped countless youth organizations and summer camps (Wadland, 1976), gave equal weight to developing ancestral crafts and understanding the natural world (MacEachren, 2001). In his 1976 dissertation, Wadland provided a history of Seton's contribution to both the anti-industrial conservation movement and ironically, the perpetuation of the status quo through the Boy Scouts of America (Wadland, 1976). Many introductions and histories of outdoor education relegate Seton to a single sentence, mentioning him alongside Baden-Powell as one of the founders of the Boy Scouts (Loynes, 2018; White, 2011). However, many Americans have belonged to an organization that was influenced by Seton's Woodcraft Indians. I belonged to two such organizations, one in Connecticut, not far from Seton's home in Cos Cob and one in Maine, at my first childhood sleep away camp. Wadland's comprehensive history describes a man who was both driven by extreme ambition and a strong desire to fight against the technology driven, anthropocentric motivation of the progressive era (Wadland, 1976). Seton demonstrated his connectedness to nature and his desire to create communities that were localized, based in craft and ecologically minded through a large body of written work and through his development of the Woodcraft Indians.

Seton was born in England and moved to Canada when he was young. He was drawn to the wilderness as a child and returned to the Manitoba wilderness as an adult, studying the plants and animals in the region. His father encouraged him to become an artist, which he considered to be an appropriate career for someone of Seton's status. Drawing from his childhood experience, Seton published several books in an effort to inspire children to return to nature. These books promoted woodcraft activities that Seton had developed through his personal experiences with Indigenous people and his extensive research of the experiences of his contemporaries (Wadland, 1976). Seton's ideas became increasingly anti-modern as he witnessed and experienced an increasingly competitive, destructive and unfulfilling culture of "progress" (Wadland, 1976).

Seton's Woodcraft Indians first began as an experiment to help a group of local boys. These boys had vandalized his property in Cos Cob, Connecticut, so Seton invited the boys to camp out at his "Indian Village", a fire ring surrounded by teepees made from Sioux, Blackfoot and Cheyenne designs (Wadland, 1976). His goal was to teach them a different way of living with and relating to nature, each other, and the world in which they were living (Wadland, 1976). Over time, this group developed into the Woodcraft Indians. The Woodcraft Indians incorporated a child led model that valued individual growth through a system of earning coup and feathers. Meetings were organized in a tribal structure and were held around a council fire. They eventually published a guidebook so that others could follow their model. Seton was a pacifist, so he encouraged skills like tracking for the purpose of nature photography and de-emphasized the role of hunting. He was also a regionalist and was particularly bothered by the progressive ideas

of uniformity and nationalism, so he was careful to provide details about specific customs of specific tribes when he described his woodcraft activities (Wadland, 1976).

While his Woodcraft Indians program developed a pan-Indian persona, Seton's motivation to create this model was the recognition that each small tribal community had unique qualities, but all had an understanding that man was not superior to nature (Wadland, 1976). Similarly, his model could be used by church organizations, YMCA groups, and local organizations to bring woodcraft to boys (and eventually girls) in their area. Seton even encouraged modifications for urban students, including rooftop camps where participants could set up teepees, create gardens and sit around a council fire (Wadland, 1976). The legacy of Seton's Woodcraft Indians might be that it laid the foundation for the Boy Scouts of America, however, Seton split with the organization early on because the goals of the BSA ran contrary to his beliefs that the Indigenous ways of living in nature were far superior to the colonial and pioneer-centric teachings of his peers. Many of Seton's ideas were incorporated into the original Boy Scout manual and over the years, Seton felt that his ideas were taken and twisted to fit the nationalistic and militaristic mission of that organization (Wadland, 1976).

Seton's Woodcraft Indians developed in a time of racism and marginalization of Indigenous people. He experienced the massacre at Wounded Knee and expressed moral outrage that a people that he knew personally could be treated so inhumanely (Wadland, 1976). Seton's movement was not an attempt to romanticize the Indigenous population, but rather to highlight some of the amazing features in their cultures. Without the context of his personal letters and ample writings, as presented and analyzed by Wadland, most current research simply presents Seton as having taken a romantic view of Indigenous

culture and used it for his own purposes (1976). Seton promoted Indigenous knowledge, crafts and activities as the remedy for the moral decay in the progressive, technologically oriented society of the early 1900's, making him the grandfather of the ancestral skills movement. Seton's ideas were emulated in programs and camps across the country, used in a decentralized fashion, and continued to promote ancestral skills and knowledge into the second half of the century (Wadland, 1976). In the 1940s, Sharp and Hahn once again brought traditional craft and skills into mainstream education, only to fade away as other pieces of their program were cherry picked for their cultural relevance (MacEachren, 2001; Sharp, 1948). By the 1960s, ancestral skills had almost completely faded away in the world of youth education.

In 1966, two new programs would change the trajectory of Ancestral Skills Education in Western culture. In Georgia, Eliot Wigginton established the Foxfire program with a group of students who were disengaged in his high school English class. In Utah, Larry Dean Olsen established an outdoor survival skills class for students who were at risk to drop out of college. Both programs were highly successful and were life changing for many participants (Green et al., 2011; White, 2011). Two important elements were critical for their success. First, they highlighted the stories and skills that helped people to be self-sufficient in the past in order to transform the lives of students in the present. Second, they provided an informal and participatory learning environment where students could learn what they needed to learn, instead of following an established curriculum (Green et al., 2011; White, 2011).

The Foxfire project was initially established by a group of students at Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School in Northeast Georgia. Under the guidance of an English teacher who

was struggling to keep them engaged in his English class, they decided to create a magazine that told the stories and traditions of their Southern Appalachian neighbors. They named themselves “Foxfire”, after a local fungus that glows in the dark, because they hoped their project would “bring a little light” to their county (Green et al., 2011). As the students went out and interviewed their older neighbors, they started to develop deep relationships with their interviewees. They learned the skills and traditions that were of fading importance in their modernized world. While Foxfire might be known for its books and magazines, many of which are still widely read today, it had a far greater impact on the participants than just providing an alternative English credit. Foxfire has been promoted as a success for experiential education and similar programs have been implemented in schools across the country. However, the teaching of skills was once again devalued when the program made its way across the country, as the program organizers promoted it through the culturally accepted pedagogical lens of John Dewey. The experiential nature of the interviewing process was highlighted as the spark that kept students engaged. Students in the program shared that their connections to others and their participation in their lives were the transformative aspects of this program (Green et al., 2011).

Larry Dean Olsen’s journey with ancestral skills began when he was 12. He found an arrowhead in his uncle’s irrigation ditch and was fascinated by the way that the stone had been transformed. A struggling reader, his teacher gave him a book about the Indians who created that arrowhead and he taught himself to read in order to read that book (White, 2011). A few weeks later, his father took him to the library in Pocatello. In that library, there was an archaeology lab full of arrowheads, knives and other artifacts. He

learned that these were from the Paiute Indians and he “became Paiute right then” (Karamat Wilderness Ways, 2012). Olsen wanted to learn how to create all of the artifacts that he found, so he started reading papers on the subject and began experimenting with different materials. By the time he was 16, he was flintknapping all of the time and his parents worried about him getting a job. He decided to get married and become a teacher, so went to school locally for a few years and then transferred to BYU (Karamat Wilderness Ways, 2012).

Olsen was a student at BYU when he was first hired to teach wilderness skills to other students. The school quickly saw value in his class and hired him to develop a program to help students who were in danger of being expelled. Olsen’s program took students into the wilderness and helped build character and resilience through a 30 day immersion in ancestral skills and survival knowledge. It was highly successful and many of these students used their newfound confidence and resilience to complete their college education (TJack Survival, 2017; White, 2011). This class was the start of two branches of Ancestral Skills Education, both with strong ties to Larry Dean Olsen. It grew into the Boulder Outdoor Survival School, providing the model for survival schools across the country. Olsen also planted the seed for the Wilderness Therapy industry. Olsen would go on to advise on many wilderness therapy schools, create an organization to oversee the ethical development of wilderness therapy programs, and eventually to start the Anasazi wilderness therapy program. The Anasazi model has been duplicated by many programs and is considered to be the gold standard in wilderness therapy (Karamat Wilderness Ways, 2012).

As the Foxfire program grew in Georgia and the Boulder Outdoor Survival School inspired other programs in the West, Tom Brown was learning ancestral skills as a young boy in New Jersey. Like Olsen, his childhood experiences set him on a path to teach ancestral skills to thousands (Walker & Brown, 2019). Tom Brown was also a child when he first started learning ancestral skills. His teacher, Stalking Wolf, was the Southern Lipan Apache great grandfather of a classmate. In one of his first meetings, Tom viewed Stalking Wolf's primitive camp and described a feeling of awe similar to Olsen's arrowhead experience. The camp was essentially a workshop, with handmade items in various stages of completion. Stalking Wolf had traveled throughout North and South America, learning skills, stories and traditions from many indigenous groups. According to Brown, Stalking Wolf had two visions that guided his life.

His first vision was to wander far and wide in order to seek out all the primitive skills that were universal and worked in any environment. His second vision was to learn the philosophy and healing knowledge of all religions and peoples, to take their scriptures, ceremonies and dogma back to the purity of nature, in order to distill the essential truths of these separate teachings to pure truths. (Walker & Brown, 2019, p.2)

After a decade of mentoring, Tom was expected to bring this knowledge to others. Tom went on to share his knowledge through classes and books. In 1978, he established Tom Brown's Tracker School in New Jersey. Brown documented his story in his book *The Tracker*. While the Tracker School was geared towards the more dedicated survival students, Brown's field guides sold over a million copies worldwide (Tom Brown Jr's Tracker School, n.d.). Stalking Wolf taught Tom using a method that Jon Young would

later popularize, calling it Coyote Mentoring (Young et al., 2018). Young met Brown when he was a child and Brown became his coyote mentor. Coyote mentoring is an experiential learning practice where the mentor guides the learner without directly sharing information. This type of learning allows the learner to make connections instead of just receiving knowledge from their elder (Young et al., 2018). Young opened Wilderness Awareness school and combined his knowledge from Brown's teachings with the understanding he gained through his experiences with the San Bushmen. Young developed a list of eight attributes held by those who experienced nature and community connection through ancestral skills: happiness, vitality, focus, empathy, visionary, aliveness, love and presence (Jon Young Connection 1st Network, n.d.). These attributes were further developed into the 8 Shields philosophy taught by Young and others to promote nature connection (Jon Young Connection 1st Network, n.d.).

In 1968, a teenaged David Wescott read the book *The Bow and Arrow* by Saxton Page his interest in Native American culture began. Right before he went to college, he also read Larry Dean Olsen's *Survival Skills* book and the book *Ishi in Two Worlds* (TJack Survival, 2017). Wescott met Olsen by chance, as Wescott was leaving a recreational beadwork class that he was teaching and Olsen just happened to be in the hall. Wescott went on Olsen's 30 day survival skills course and worked as Olsen's assistant in future classes. Olsen phased out of teaching these classes and Wescott spent four years in the field, working with Doug Nelson. In 1977, BYU decided that they didn't want to run the survival program anymore so Doug Nelson formed the Boulder Outdoor Survival School. David went on to earn a Masters Degree in Experiential Education from UC Boulder and taught University classes (Society of Primitive Technology, 1991). He

began working for BOSS in 1983, then purchased the school and ran it from 1985 to 1997. It was important to Wescott that his instructors continued to develop their skills, so he created a requirement that they take courses from other instructors and schools in order to advance in BOSS. It was time consuming and expensive for his instructors to meet this commitment, so he revived the Rabbitstick Rendezvous in 1988 as a way to bring new information to his instructors (D. Wescott, personal communication, February 24, 2021; TJack Survival, 2017).

At this point in time, Wescott said that practitioners were keeping their skills secret. This lack of sharing was hindering the advancement of individuals abilities and the study of ancestral skills as a whole. It was for that reason, in 1988, that Wescott reinstated the Rabbitstick Rendezvous, an event originally established by Olsen and briefly run by Dick and Linda Jamison, to bring instructors together and let them share their skills in a noncompetitive and noncommercial environment (D. Wescott, personal communication, February 24, 2021). With a similar intent, the Society for Primitive Technology, of which Wescott was a founding member, was created in 1989. This group created the Bulletin of Primitive Technology, a publication that shared methods and philosophies of Ancestral Skills Education. The purpose of the society was to “promote the practice and teaching of primitive skills”, “foster communication between teachers and practitioners”, and “set standards for authenticity, ethics, and quality” (Society of Primitive Technology, 1991, p.1). The bulletin was published for 25 years, providing resources and connection for practitioners of ancestral skills (Backtracks, LLC, 2016). Some articles in the bulletin described methods and techniques for skills, others placed skills within a historical context and still others discussed philosophy and education

(Backtracks, LLC, 2016). While Olsen may be considered the father of ancestral skills education, Wescott was the architect of the events and editor of publications that fostered a connected culture of ancestral skills practitioners.

David Wescott described the origin of Rabbitstick during an informal interview. In the first year of Rabbitstick, there were 48 instructors and only 2 students. The teachers included Jim Riggs, Steve Watts and John McPhearson. The first two gatherings were formatted as a large group learning experience. Everyone worked together on a particular skill until they felt the need to move on. Wescott recalled a trip to the shooting range, where everyone took their equipment out and spent the day sharing about the wide variety of hunting technology that each had crafted and studied (D. Wescott, personal communication, February 24, 2021). By the third gathering, the word had gotten out across the country and they finally had more students than teachers. At this point, they divided students up into clans. Each group worked together, ate together and studied together. Rabbitstick was established with a foundation of trust, comradery and sharing that is central to the environment of many ancestral skills gatherings. This was a goal from the beginning of the event, creating a community and support structure for those who practiced and taught the skills. Wescott stated that each gathering is different and it is important not to “McDonaldize” the idea of the ancestral skills gathering. He went on to express that while many gatherings follow a similar structure and purpose to Rabbitstick (and in fact were developed using Rabbitstick as a model), gatherings cannot be simplified into a standard event and should be evaluated individually, as events with unique histories and traditions. Many of the traditions that are now considered to be

central to Rabbitstick, like a drumming and dancing event known as Mask Night, developed in an organic way (D. Wescott, personal communication, February 24, 2021).

Rabbitstick is not related to the mountain man rendezvous culture, even though it was originally called a Rendezvous. Similar activities occur at rendezvous or other historical reenactment events, but the non-commercial nature of this ancestral skills gathering sets it apart. Most of the vendors at Rabbitstick are also instructors. They are selling their items to support their teaching activities. Wescott recalled a year when Hawk, an instructor, wrote on a \$20 bill and encouraged all of the participants to see how many times that money could change hands over the course of the week. This example helped participants to understand the importance of this in house economy, which directly supported the teachers who were volunteering their time and expertise. Rabbitstick does not charge a vendor fee and does not promote the event to outside vendors (D. Wescott, personal communication, February 24, 2021).

Rabbitstick brings ancestral skills educators from all over the world into the same location, creating a similar atmosphere to a professional conference. It is more accessible to the general public than survival schools like Trackers or B.O.S.S, and can be attended for one or multiple days. Ancestral skills gatherings like Rabbitstick house the entire body of “ancestral skills” in one event. They are not, like folk schools, simply focused on the making aspect of traditional crafts. They are also unlike survival schools, which focus more on nature awareness and the skills required for subsistence. At Rabbitstick, you can participate in a small group conversation about death one afternoon, get an introduction to coal fired blacksmithing the next day and drop in on a conversation about properly preparing a pack for a survival situation.

In her 2018 article, *Rewilding Hearts and Habits in the Ancestral Skills Movement*, Sara Pike presented an ethnographic account of her experiences at several ancestral skills gatherings. Pike observed that participants have a shared love of the outdoors, but that love is expressed through the practice of skills and creation of tools. The organizers of these gatherings are prominent figures in the ancestral skills world, yet they participate in classes and promote a culture of lifelong learning (Pike, 2018). Pike found the ancestral skills movement to be driven by interactions with nature. She stated,

A central aspect of ancestral skills is using tools to transform wild things—plants and animals—by consuming them or making them into objects. The process of transforming raw materials into tools like a fire drill or useful goods like baskets is how ancestral skills practitioners express their connection to the land around them. (Pike, 2018, p.16)

In this respect, the creation of tools goes beyond simply the revival of a craft and connection to one's history. The tool and the ecological knowledge that surrounds it (for example, how to harvest and hunt sustainably) create a connectedness to the earth and a feeling of being part of something more (MacEachren, 2001;Pike, 2018).

The boundaries of what can be considered an ancestral skill continue to be pushed, challenged, and debated. Just as Seton expanded his definition of Woodcraft to include nature photography (Seton, 1915), many ancestral skills educators have expanded ancestral skills education to include skills like blacksmithing and to allow modern tools (like machined knives) to be used as part of the “ancestral” making process. Susan Eirich-Dehne and Elizabeth MacEachren both choose to place these skills within a

context of connection, rather than technological advancement. Susan Eirich-Dehne captured this feeling of connectedness as she documented her experience with the Manitoga Wigwam Encampment:

From a quest originating in the old part of our brain, spokes of fascination radiate out, different for each of us at the encampment, coming to fruition in the graceful shapes of a functional pot or the sharp, clear, well-defined edges of a fine stone knife as we followed the details of a technology - different spokes, all interconnecting in a larger circle of meaning and function; strands of seekings, meanings, and experience interweaving, contributing to a feeling of wholeness, “rightness” and community. (Eirich-Dehne, 1999, loc 694)

MacEachren defines this connection similarly but more succinctly, “A person who makes, and then uses a clay mug, becomes involved in a fundamental experience of being in the world” (MacEachren, 2001, p. 3).

Survival Skills and Ancestral Connection

Survival skills, also known as Bushcraft, focus on topics that are still central to our survival needs: fire, water, shelter and food. The bow drill is often one of the first survival skills that students experience in ASE. The bow drill, hand drill and other friction fire techniques represent the earliest ways of creating fire. Beyond the “wow factor” of being able to start a fire without a match or lighter, this skill is a representation of self-sufficiency. However, as Wescott (as cited in Fenton, 2016) points out, the bow drill may have been taught more as a rite of passage, due to the excitement of creating fire, and less as a skill that was truly used for survival. The tradition of teaching this skill

began with Seton, was transmitted through the Boy Scout manual and was continued on by Larry Dean Olsen as an initiation skill (Wescott, as cited in Fenton, 2016). Fire is a primary component of our humanity. Most people still gather around fire in some form, even those who live an urban lifestyle, simply by lighting candles on a birthday cake or running with sparklers on Independence Day. Fire is one carry over from our shared past that we still use for celebration, warmth, and cooking on a daily basis. In his 1912 book, *The Book of Woodcraft and Indian Lore*, Seton described the “magic of the campfire” as his 4th leading principle of Outdoor Life:

What is a camp without a campfire — no camp at all, but a chilly place in a landscape, where some people happen to have some things. When first the brutal anthropoid stood up and walked erect — was man, the great event was symbolized and marked by the lighting of the first campfire. For millions of years our race has seen in this blessed fire, the means and emblem of light, warmth, protection, friendly gathering, council. All the hallow of the ancient thoughts, hearth, fireside, home is centered in its glow, and the home-tie itself is weakened with the waning of the home-fire. Not in the steam radiator can we find the spell; not in the water coil; not even in the gas log; they do not reach the heart. Only the ancient sacred fire of wood has power to touch and thrill the chords of primitive remembrance. When men sit together at the campfire they seem to shed all modern form and poise, and hark back to the primitive - to meet as man and man - to show the naked soul. Your campfire partner wins your love, or hate, mostly your love; and having camped in peace together, is a lasting bond of union - however wide your worlds may be apart. The campfire, then, is the focal centre of

all primitive brotherhood. We shall not fail to use its magic powers. (Seton, 2020, pp.4-5)

Pike described her experience with the bow drill, a moment when she felt the excitement and accomplishment of what ancestral skills practitioners sometimes call “busting a coal”. This is a moment in her research when it was apparent that she felt the “magic” of Ancestral Skills Education.

My jaw was beginning to get sore as I bent over a small wooden board trying to make fire. My teeth bit down hard on a piece of wood out of which a spindle rotated in the board held by my knees, while I pulled a strip of rawhide looped around the spindle back and forth. Dark specks of wood accumulated near the hole on the board where the spindle was spinning, and before long, wisps of smoke drifted out of the hole. A tiny coal started to glow. “You have fire!”

...

There was something about the friction fire, its simplicity and elegance, that made it special, part of an initiation into a new tribe. I wondered if everyone who successfully completed a skill for the first time (tanning a hide, weaving a willow basket) felt something similar: A deep connection to the past and in the case of fire, to millennia of fire making with simple tools from one’s surroundings. (Pike, 2018, p.13)

While friction fire and other survival skills can often awaken a feeling of deep connection, other skills have been found to create connection in different contexts. Folk schools have long provided practitioners with avenues for skill development in a non-

competitive and non-commercial environment, with a similar culture of sharing to the ancestral skills gatherings (Totten, 2017).

Folk Skills and Cultural Connection

Folk skills, or traditional skills, are ways of making, doing and living that can be traced back to a particular culture. These skills represent cultural knowledge that has been passed down through generations through apprenticeships and guided participation (Rogoff, 2003). In the 1920's, the cultural support of the Arts and Crafts movement helped to launch the American Folk School. The goal of these schools was to transmit traditional skills and knowledge to teenagers and adults in a culture where apprenticeship and guided participation in these skills had been devalued. These schools were not competitive, did not have grades and were not designed to prepare students for higher education (Totten, 2017). American Folk schools were inspired by the work of N. F. S. Grundtvig, who originally proposed them as a solution for rural education in Denmark. Grundtvig's philosophy embraced place based, experiential learning, and the application of knowledge "in service to humanity" (Totten, 2017, p.38). According to Totten, "Grundtvig advocated for teaching 'folk' materials, or traditional knowledge in handicraft, music, and stories, believing that the essential elements of humanity had been refined and reduced into what remained of folk culture" (2017, pp.50-51). Ironically, in Denmark, this was part of a movement to create a nationalist identity. In the U.S., folk education was used to revive local and regional traditional skills. This small anti-modernist effort was fueled by the Arts and Crafts movement of the early twentieth century (Totten, 2017).

Kelley Totten's 2017 ethnographic dissertation describes her experiences at three folk schools between 2014 and 2015. Totten describes them as non-competitive environments where students of all ages and ability levels come to learn crafts and share time with others who have common interests (2017). Regardless of their non-Western environment, Folk schools were supported by the progressive education movement in the early 20th century. The American Arts and Crafts movement shifted the focus of early Appalachian folk schools to embrace a revival of traditional handcrafts (Totten, 2017). This movement began as a response to the industrialization of society, an effort to regain cultural balance, though over time, it disintegrated into a display of status by acquiring and displaying rustic, traditional handmade items (Jackson Lears, 1994; Totten, 2017).

Folk schools offer short courses in traditional handcrafts, generally ranging from short day and evening classes to week-long immersion classes. While each school offers their own loose definition of "traditional" and "handcraft", they have a common goal of embracing a community of makers who simply enjoy the experience of craft (Totten, 2017). Campbell, a folk school visited by Totten, invited participants to stay together, eat communally and share the experience beyond attending classes. Totten felt that this structure allowed them to create a feeling of community connectedness among participants. She called this experience "summer camp for adults" (Totten, 2017 p. 84), as students came from a variety of places and backgrounds to spend a week learning and living together. While attending graduate school and living in Oregon, Totten created her own event called Looplore, a folk school experience in an outdoor location. Participants spent the weekend camping and learning from each other. This experience, similar to an

ancestral skills gathering, “reinforced ideas of recreation and the power of escape, as everyone left the camp each year refreshed” (Totten, 2017, p.11).

At each folk school she visited, Totten experienced a strong feeling of community connectedness and a loose affiliation with culture and place. For example, the Northhouse Folk School taught classes on yurt making, as their mission was to teach northern crafts and Yurts were from a northern area. The Campbell school taught crafts that were from their local Appalachian traditions, as well as Indigenous traditions from the local area (Totten, 2017). Each of these schools were dedicated to creating an environment that was non-competitive and welcoming to all, though the majority of participants were white, retired and well off (Totten, 2017). Participants in these programs felt that craft connected them to their ancestors or gave them a feeling of connection to culture in general. According to Totten, “It was not as important for some participants if they had someone in their family or knew of someone who practiced a specific tradition or craft in the past; the craft could act as a stand-in for their ancestors, a way to identify an unknown past” (Totten, 2017, p.147).

Boyd’s “Legacy Cafe” program created an intergenerational experience where young children and their families learned handcrafts from elders in the community. Elders were recruited from local care homes to teach skills like sewing, knitting and baking. These skills were recognized as ancestral cultural skills that were being “lost” or de-emphasized by Western culture and education. Skills were shared in an informal setting, with elders mentoring young students and their families. The experience was beneficial for all. The elders felt as if they were contributing to the younger generation. The children began to see material items as things that they could use and repair instead

of throwing away. Boyd stated, “These ‘life skills’ are the necessary skills that must be shared and extended intergenerationally, to ensure children develop sustainable mindsets” (Boyd, 2019).

In her 2001 dissertation, Elizabeth MacEachren called for a return to “craft” based education as a solution to many of the current issues in Environmental Education. MacEachren specifically focused on what she called “nature-craft”, or Ancestral Skills Education. MacEachren described personal experiences as she lived with and learned from the Anishinaabe, a First Nation people in Canada. MacEachren asserted that in order to accomplish the goals of Environmental Education, students must rekindle their connection to the earth, and that this connection can happen within the structure of Western schooling, through craft (2001). MacEachren’s study clearly demonstrated this connection through her own experience and the experiences of educators who have incorporated craft into their educational philosophy. MacEachren’s dissertation laid a foundation for the current study and was a first step towards documenting a shared experience of connectedness through “nature-craft” or Ancestral Skills Education.

MacEachren points to four educators who promoted craft in education: Steiner, Gandhi, Hahn and Seton. Seton and Hahn have been discussed in this literature review as leaders in ancestral and outdoor education. Steiner and Gandhi shared important community-based perspectives on craft education. Steiner developed the Waldorf system, which employs natural materials and handcrafts in the classroom and “enables students to create perspectives of themselves as functioning citizens of the world, consciously aware of their relationship with the natural entities they rely upon” (MacEachren, 2001, p.50). Gandhi promoted craft as a way of taking back the culture of his people. His ideas were

connected to the anti-industrial movement, emphasizing “the importance of the link between the way an item is made and the economic system that everyone including craftmakers live within” (MacEachren, 2001, P.60). These leaders are important proponents of craft education, but as their focus is not outdoor education, their history lies outside of the scope of this literature review.

Indigenous Foundations

The ways of teaching and learning ancestral skills employ methods of education which have been passed down through Indigenous cultures for most of the history of education. It is important to reiterate that these are not new ideas or new models for pedagogy. These are old ideas that have been devalued by Western schooling for a short period in time, as compared to the history of education. Cajete, the Indigenous author of *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*, shared the way in which the purpose of education was defined by the Nahuatl speaking Aztecs of Mexico , “the ideal purpose of education was to” “find one’s face, find one’s heart” and search for a “foundation”, a truth, a support, a way of life and work through with one could express one’s Life” (1994, p.34). Cajete called for all of us to reframe education through Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. He asserted that this will not only provide for better opportunities for American Indian youth, but it will provide a more balanced focus of education, moving away from the consumerist model promoted by Western schooling (Cajete, 1994). Cajete (1994) listed the primary methods of Tribal education as experiential learning, storytelling, ritual/ceremony, dreaming, tutoring/apprenticeship, and artistic creation. He shared several pages of qualities that define Indigenous education which are too numerous to list in this review, but can be found on pages 29-31

of *Look to the Mountain*. Many of these qualities are echoed by other educators calling for similar reforms, building off Cajete's work.

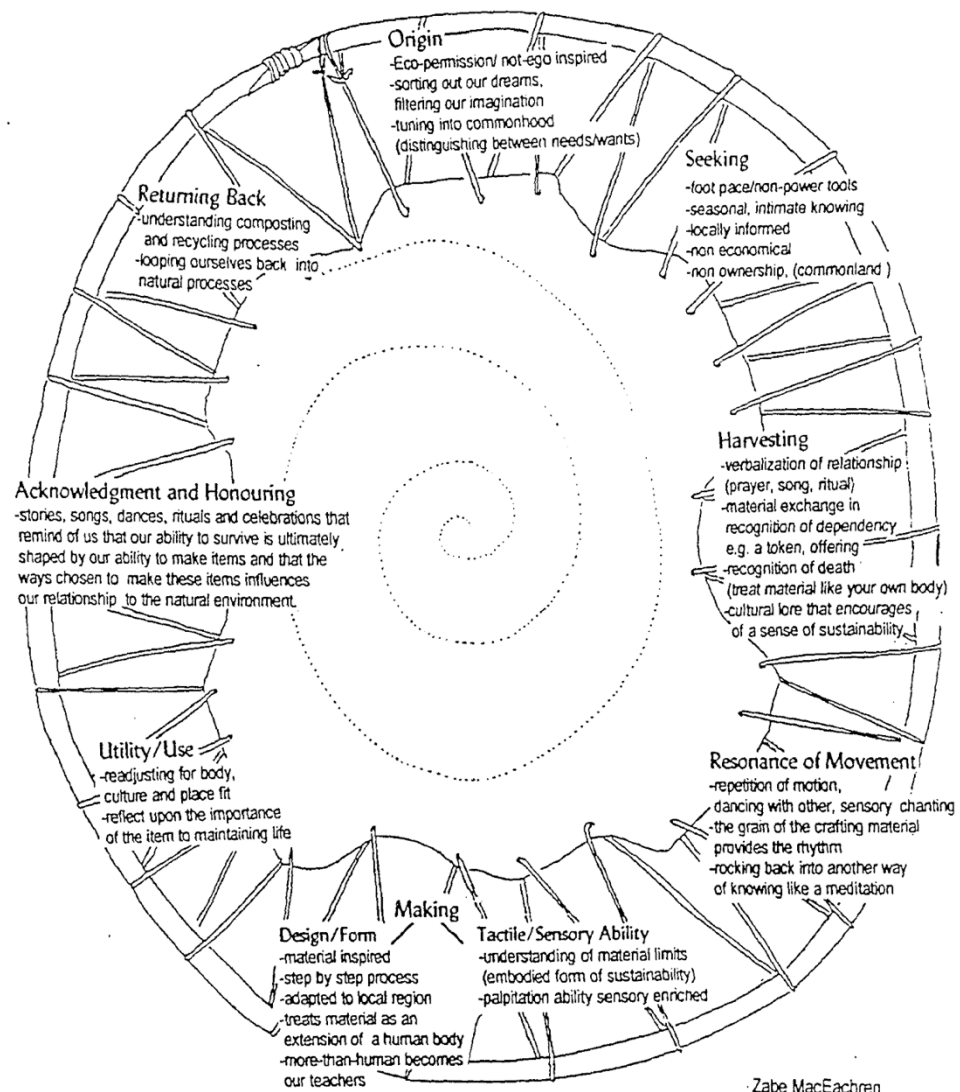
Barajas-López and Bang's 2018 study of making contrasted Indigenous ways of knowing with the capitalist undertones of the current maker movement. The maker movement is consumption focused, not promoting craft activities for the sake of cultural or historical connection, but promoting craft from a capitalist marketplace perspective and or with the purpose of engaging children through hands-on activities (Barajas-López & Bang, 2018). Barajas-López and Bang found that when practicing craft using an Indigenous making and sharing model, participants felt a connectedness to both the materials and their ancestors. In their study of a camp program, one of the leaders situated a clay making activity within the context of an Indigenous community and the land and water surrounding them (Barajas-López and Bang, 2018). This context helped participants to feel more connected to the land and to their ancestors (Barajas-López and Bang, 2018). In this study, Barajas-López and Bang established that Indigenous making and sharing:

1. Enacts and communicates stories in a multiplicity of forms in and across temporalities. Knowing, being, and doing are simultaneously unfolding and are essential/defining elements in the practice of material storytelling;
2. Reflects the patterns and processes that cultivate life and draw on deeply interrelated socioecological phenomena requiring interdisciplinary forms of sense-making.
3. Enacts relationships with animate materials that have life courses toward the fulfillment of communal responsibilities.

4. Enables continual renewal of family and community to assert contemporary presences and living Indigenous nature-culture relations. (Barajas-López & Bang, 2018, p.17)

Two non-Indigenous educators, Young and MacEachren, have incorporated these Indigenous ideas into their pedagogy, asserting that there is a need to shift our perspective from a Western, consumerist view of community and environment, to a more Indigenous view. While Young's focus is more on nature connection, MacEachren presented a pedagogical map for teachers and practitioners of craft that oriented craft in a similar way to Barajas-López and Bang. MacEachren also shared a representation of how craft is approached by Western culture, which again equates to Barajas-López and Bang's description. MacEachren presented these ideas as figures instead of descriptions and these figures are being replicated in this dissertation, as they are the best representation of MacEachren's ideas.

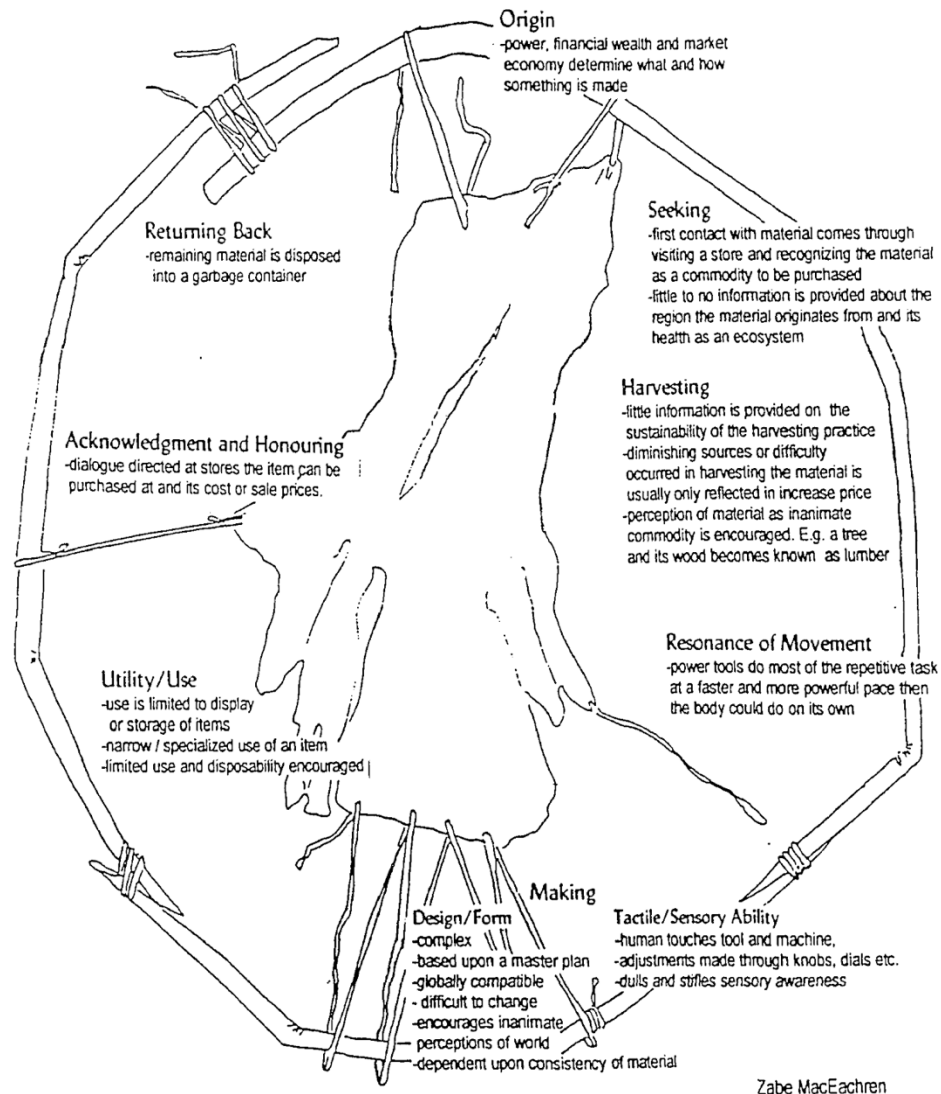
Figure 2:



Craft Making Map

Note. From "Craftmaking: A Pedagogy for Environmental Awareness." by E. MacEachren, 2001, p. 145

Figure 3:



Acid Society's Process of Making Items and Commodities

Note. From "Craftmaking: A Pedagogy for Environmental Awareness." by E. MacEachren, 2001, p. 146

MacEachren's images support Barajas-López and Bang's claim that the maker movement, guided by the process described by MacEachren's "Acid Society's Process of Making Items and Commodities" figure perpetuates a colonial viewpoint through the

consumer-based orientation of projects. This view is juxtaposed with MacEachren's craft making map, informed by both her interviews with practitioners of craft and her understanding of craft developed during her time with the Anishinaabe people. While MacEachren's voice is not an Indigenous voice, she is careful to properly cite the sources of her knowledge and respect the origin of her information. As the majority of knowledge and pedagogy of Ancestral Skills Education is being shared by Indigenous people and is being practiced by Indigenous communities, it is important to visit the discussion of cultural appropriation. How do we transmit the ideas and methods of Ancestral Skills Education while honoring and accepting leadership from the cultures where these ideas are still incorporated into everyday living?

Cultural Appropriation

McCallum (2005) introduced a theme that runs parallel to the development and practice of ancestral skills over time: cultural appropriation and "playing Indian". The image of the "Noble Savage" may have originally been shaped by propaganda, an attempt by European countries to encourage immigration into the United States (Taylor, 2010). This image was a stereotype of all tribes, symbolizing the innocence and morality of all Indigenous people in the United States (Taylor, 2010). During the early twentieth century, as the nature study movement pushed back on accepted schooling practices (Minton, 1980), progressive education sought to engage our children in more meaningful ways (Dewey, 2015), and the folk schools championed a return to traditional craft, the American Indian was exalted as the example of a more "primitive" way of interacting with the earth, thus an example to all those who were lured into weaker existence by the modernized world (McCallum, 2005; Taylor, 2010). The Arts and Crafts movement of

the late 19th and early 20th century further stereotyped the American Indigenous population as superior craftsmen (Taylor, 2010). Taylor asserted that this theme is still echoed at ancestral skills gatherings, knap-ins, rendezvous and commercial pow-wows. However, the majority of Taylor's experiences were events where buying and selling were the central purpose. Taylor's 2010 ethnographic study of a Polybian-Indian movement in the southeastern found that many participants "described the United States, or even the entire world, to be in spiritual, moral and environmental decay, for which the Indian-way was a solution" (p.14).

Over the course of European American history, the ways of American Indigenous cultures have been "borrowed", packaged for personal consumption and sold as cures for problems ranging from modernity (McCallum, 2005) to children's behavioral health (Oles, 2008). In the U.S., Seton's Woodcraft Indians organization is one of the first in a long line of well intentioned movements that were harmful to the cultures from which rituals and traditions were plucked without maintaining the cultural meaning or context. Organizations like the Woodcraft Indians and the Campfire Girls have been portrayed as appropriating craft, religion and social organization, but as discussed by McCallum (2005) and Wadland (1976), the history of these movements is far more complex than simply romanticizing the American Indian. Ironically, the incredible popularity of these movements can be contrasted with the treatment of actual, living American Indian tribes in this time period, through destructive U.S. policy and cultural stereotypes.

I, myself, was an "Indian Princess" as a child and have fond memories of attending the annual "Pancake Pow-wow" with my father. I have a photo album filled with images of girls wearing beads and headbands, with their fathers in full headdresses.

This YMCA program was designed in the 1920's to help fathers bond with their sons ("Indian Guides"), and expanded in the 1950s to include fathers and daughters ("Indian Princesses"). The premise of the program was that people of European descent should learn the Indian way, where fathers participated in the raising of their children (Chandler/Gilbert YMCA, n.d.). This was an attempt to address social ills by overgeneralizing the cultures of Indigenous populations and creating organizations based on a fabricated and oversimplified (though well intentioned) premise.

This dissertation was originally about "primitive skills" education and over the course of the research, I removed the word "primitive" and replaced it with "ancestral". This was a difficult decision because the word "primitive" initially seemed to fit the entire description of the area of research. Folk schools were an avenue for learning traditional hand craft skills, or "making" skills, but "primitive" skills encompassed so much more. These skills included mindfully walking through the woods, identifying plants and knowing which once could hurt and which could heal.. These skills included bird language, storytelling, tracking, and navigation. These skills included fire from friction, creating points and making cordage. Many of these skills were shared by all people at one point in history, regardless of our recent ancestry. Over the course of this study, I spoke with many people about the use of the word "primitive". While the accepted definition of primitive states that it is a "first" skill, one that was necessary for the survival and creation of our first cultures, the large number of academic references to "primitive" activities in association with appropriation of American Indian cultures creates a case to select a word with different undertones. According to Oles (2008), cultural appropriation of "Indianness" continues in modern wilderness therapy programs,

where ceremonies and practices are sometimes incorporated without reverence for cultural context or appropriateness. When discussing issues in current wilderness therapy programs, Oles asserts that not much has changed in the 100 years since the start of these anti-modernist movements, “Many non-Indian people within Western society seem to think of Indians as a separate species from them, with a cosmology based upon fear and superstition. Worse, they may view us as curiosities, or as stage props instead of people” (Oles, 2008 p. 424). Taylor’s 2010 ethnographic study found that creation and consumption of “Indian things” perpetuated a cultural misrepresentation of “Indianness” as an ideology, often to the exclusion of those who were actually of American Indian descent.

In Europe, the art of recreating paleolithic tools by shaping them with other stones and tools, known as flint knapping, was first popularized by John Evans in the late 1850’s. However, Bulstrode noted that this practice was slow to extend to America, as “There was no difficulty in understanding man-made flint tools found in America – the context to frame their interpretation was readily available in the culture of indigenes” (Bulstrode, 2016, p.17). Kidder (1999) argues that the most logical explanation for the similarities in fire making techniques between cultures that are so distant, for example, the Australian aborigines and the American Indian, is that these technologies are old enough to be connected to early man, though he admits the possibility that each culture could have spontaneously developed the idea. Methods of making cordage are similar between the San bushmen of Botswana and indigenous cultures in North and South America. This contrast of a dominant culture “rediscovering” a skill in an attempt to reclaim knowledge that was lost and non-dominant culture passing down a skill in an

attempt to maintain their cultural knowledge is at the heart of the cultural appropriation debate.

Wescott, Olsen and other founders of the current ancestral skills movement point to the stone age as our common denominator, and assert that ancestral skills, and particularly making and using tools to ensure our survival, are the domain of all people at some point in their history (Olsen, 2021; Watts, 1999; Wescott, 1999). In the introduction to a multi-book collection of skills as taught by his contemporaries, Wescott says, “Being culture-bearing is the essence of what makes us human. And our connection to tools - the longest recorded evidence of culture- has much to do with how we define ourselves and our relationship to the expanded range of environments and challenges we now experience” (Wescott, 1999, loc 1651). However, Wescott and others are very clear about the boundaries of appropriation. Wescott says, “cite your sources” when discussing the current wave of survivalist youtubers and celebrities (TJack Survival, 2017). He is referring not only to the cultures where specific skills and methods may have come from, but to those in the field of experimental archaeology who may have “rediscovered” a particular skill or method. In his book, *Rewild or Die*, Bauer distinguishes both the origin of the skill and the purpose for its use in a discussion of appropriation. He gives the example of recording and selling a Lakota song, versus making and using a bow drill. One is clearly the property of another culture and the other is a skill common to every culture at some point in their history (Urban Scout, 2016).

This literature review began by discussing the current research in nature and community connectedness. It then went on to place our current disconnect with nature and community within the context of Western schooling, increased urbanization and

industrialization. Over the past 150 years, many educators attempted to re-establish more traditional ways of teaching and learning through participatory and informal means. Those, like Dewey, whose words still guide the path of Western schooling, were politically and culturally aligned with the idea of “progress”, a financially motivated trajectory that included urbanization, industrialization and compulsory education. Those, like Seton, who stopped to question whether “progress” was in fact, the best path, were largely forgotten, though their ideas have been incorporated into many summer camps, wilderness therapy and after school programs. Folk schools, outdoor survival schools and ancestral skills gatherings are examples of participatory, informal learning environments where practitioners can re-establish and nurture their feelings of connectedness to nature and to community through ASE. Chapter 3 will explain my research design for this study, which describes the essence of this feeling, through the experiences of ten ancestral skills practitioners.

Chapter 3: Research Design

Moustakas states, “In phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic. The researcher’s excitement and curiosity inspire the search. Personal history brings the core of the problem into focus” (1994, p. 104). The origin of this study is my own experience with nature and community connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education. It didn’t start that way. It started with the general topic of Ancestral Skills Education. My advisor kept bringing me back to this topic, asking questions like “Why is this important?” and “What are we studying here?” This process took months. It was not until I found a paper on the Anthropocene, or era where humans control the destiny of the earth, that it finally clicked. Nature and

community connectedness could potentially foster a course correction from our increasingly isolating and financially focused way of living. Any path where people can experience this connectedness should have a place in the literature. After a comprehensive search, few studies were identified that explored ancestral skills education. I chose phenomenology because of the lack of research on this topic, I simply wanted to create a description of this phenomenon. It is my hope that once this phenomenon is well defined, it will be easy to study using existing scales for nature and community connectedness.

Research Question

This study sought to develop a description of the phenomenon of nature and community connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education by asking the following question:

What is the shared experience of nature and community connectedness for participants in Ancestral Skills Education?

Subquestion 1: What are the shared characteristics of ancestral skills experiences that helped them to feel this connectedness?

Subquestion 2: Are there shared paths to a feeling of connectedness?

Subquestion 3: How has connectedness changed their relationship with the environment and community?

Methodology

This research study followed a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design. In phenomenological research, participants in an event or experience are asked to share their stories of the experience. The primary researcher gathers enough participant stories to create a complete picture of the experience or event. The primary researcher then analyzes the interview data for significant statements and shared themes. Finally, the primary researcher creates a shared description of the phenomenon based on the interview data (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

The transcendental phenomenology was originally outlined by Husserl, in his 1931 book *Ideas*. Husserl asserted that objective knowledge could not be separated from subjective knowledge. He stated, “The World is the totality of objects that can be known through experience (Erfahrung), known in terms of orderly theoretical thought on the basis of direct present (aktueller) experience” (Husserl, 2013, p. 56). In order to have knowledge of a thing, one must examine the experience of this thing and then proceed to make meaning from this experience. The essence of this thing is what makes it part of a larger group of things and helps us to create the larger picture of the phenomenon. Husserl equates essence to fact, though draws some distinction between the two as defined in empirical inquiry (Husserl, 2013). The meaning behind this thing is then also linked to the experiencer, as there can be no objective without the subjective (Husserl, 2013). In this study, each co-researcher shares their experiences. The experiences are then analyzed using a transcendental phenomenological process in order to create an understanding of the essence and meaning of the experience.

According to Moustakas, “Phenomena are the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge ” (1994, p.26). A phenomenological study aims to intentionally describe a phenomenon by discovering the noema and noesis of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The noema is the “what”. Moustakas (1994) calls this the textural description, the explanation that paints a picture of the phenomenon. The noesis is a structural description, the “how” and “why”, the deeper meaning of the phenomenon. The textural description and structural description are then combined to create a complete description of the phenomenon.

Phenomenological research can be defined by the processes of epoche, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). The epoche process enables the researcher to obtain the true horizons of the phenomenon, beyond the scope of the researcher’s initial perception and assumptions. This process is important for both the researcher and each co-researcher to experience in some way. For co-researchers, a simple meditation process prior to sharing their experiences helps them to explore the pure experience and acknowledge their personal judgements on the experience. For researchers, the epoche process helps them to explore their experience of the phenomenon and ultimately frame their own experience in terms of the larger phenomenon. The researcher is the conductor of the final piece, ultimately guiding the creation of both the textural and structural descriptions. The epoche process helps the researcher to understand how their personal influence may affect these descriptions and contributes to the trustworthiness of the data analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

Next, the transcendental-phenomenological reduction is a process of reducing the data to the individual elements of meaning and essence. This is an effort to get to a true understanding of the phenomenon, through a fresh perspective that is free from judgement and assumption. The researcher must be willing to alter their perception of the phenomenon as co-researchers present their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). An important part of the analysis process is the initial step of horizontalisation. Horizontalization is the process of defining the “the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinctive character” (Moustakas, 1994, p.92). The transcendental-phenomenological reduction process concludes with the creation of a textural description of the phenomenon. This is the “what”, the essence, the description of the phenomenon that is central to the experience.

Imaginative variation is employed by the researcher to discern the meaning of the experience. This meaning is framed by the question, so in the current research, “community and nature connectedness” are the focus of the imaginative variation process. The result of the imaginative variation process is a structural description of the phenomenon. This not only incorporates the meaning behind the phenomenon for the experiencers, but the conditions under which this phenomenon occurs (Moustakas, 1994). In this research, the conditions for creating an experience of nature and community connectedness are an important finding, as the description of conditions could inform the development of curricula and programs to create this connectedness.

The final stage of transcendental phenomenology is synthesis. According to Moustakas, “The fundamental textural-structural synthesis represents the essences at a particular time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an

exhaustive imaginative and reflective study of the phenomenon” (1994, p. 100). The synthesis process results in a textural-structural description of the phenomenon which situates the description of the phenomenon on the structural foundation of the phenomenon. Essentially, the process of transcendental phenomenology can be viewed as a process of deconstruction and reconstruction, resulting in a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Positionality of the Researcher

A researcher’s positionality can affect a study at all stages. According to Holmes (2020), the researcher’s positionality situates the researcher around the research topic, the study participants, and the research context and methods. In the transcendental-phenomenological research process, Moustakas (1994) proposes that prior to interviewing co-researchers, the researcher should participate in the epoche process, writing down all thoughts, feelings and experiences that could create pre-judgement with the research topic. In chapter 1, I shared “My Story”, the result of these writings. My position on this subject comes from my direct experiences in the ancestral skills community, the direct experiences of my son within this community, and my childhood experiences with ancestral skills and nature connection. The purpose of this study was simply to describe a phenomenon that I had witnessed in myself and that I had discussed at length with others who had similar experiences. My experiences and world view were heavily influenced by suburban and privileged upbringing as part of the dominant culture. In particular, my views on appropriation cannot easily be separated by the impact that certain appropriated activities had on my life. I sat around the council ring and watched a white man honor the four directions, and was profoundly changed by that activity, even

though the ceremony was stolen from another religion for the purpose of awarding badges to girls at my summer camp. My interpretation of this research cannot escape the context of the culture in which I was raised.

As a participant in the ancestral skills community for the past 5 years, I could be considered an “insider” within this community, though I am not qualified to be a co-researcher as I do not have any experience teaching ancestral skills. The participants in this research are part of my community, though not necessarily people that I knew prior to conducting the research. I camped with one co-researcher at multiple ancestral skills gatherings. I took classes from four of the co-researchers over the past five years. I met four co-researchers for the first time at the Fire to Fire gathering. I met one co-researcher through a Facebook group and have never had any contact with her outside of our interview. As an insider, co-researchers often shared experiences using colloquialisms and referred to other members of the community with the expectation that I would know them or know of them. This level of familiarity could have influenced the detail with which co-researchers described some events, feelings and relationships, as they may have assumed that I just “knew” what they were talking about.

This topic is important to me, thus my choice of phenomenology. The idea for the research came from my own intense interest in the topic of ancestral skills and its potential contribution to the field of education. However, my experience in this topic is limited to the ancestral skills gatherings I have attended, the ancestral skills program that we offer at our school, and informal get togethers with a local nature connection group. This positions me outside of the world of those who run survival and folk schools as well as the politics of the ancestral skills community. This movement is sensitive to the

academic world, especially when it comes to the conversation of cultural appropriation, and the leadership is wary of the implications of academic writing on the topic. In conversations with leadership, I was viewed as an outsider and scrutinized for the intent and purpose of my research.

Participants

In phenomenological research, participants are viewed as “co-researchers” (Moustakas, 1994), as they are participating in a journey of discovery alongside the primary researcher. Ten co-researchers were interviewed for this study. In addition, the organizers of two ancestral skills gatherings were contacted for background information on their philosophies and the history of the gatherings. Co-researchers were initially selected using the following criteria:

1. Co-researchers had some experience both teaching and learning ancestral skills.
2. Co-researchers had stories of how and when Ancestral Skills Education made an impact on their lives.
3. Co-researchers were available for either an online interview using Google Meet or an in person interview at the Fire to Fire gathering.

Co-researchers were not asked to identify their age, but with the exception of one, they were all adults in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Seven co-researchers identified as men and three identified as women.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection began in the spring of 2020. I interviewed Patrick Farneman, the organizer of the Between the Rivers ancestral skills gathering over Google Meet. Patrick was both a resource for study participants, and a primary source for information about the Between the Rivers gathering specifically and ancestral skills gatherings in general. The original plan for this research was to interview 10 participants at the Between the Rivers and Fire to Fire gatherings. These participants would be identified by Patrick as those with stories that could help to create a robust description of the experience of nature and community connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education. However, a week after my committee approved my dissertation proposal, the 2020 Covid pandemic caused us to isolate in our homes for the next few months. The Between the Rivers gathering was cancelled and my research was bounded by the need to keep everyone safe from infection. This meant that interviews would primarily need to take place over the phone or internet or using safety protocols at the Fire to Fire gathering in June.

I presented Patrick with my selection criteria for co-researchers:

1. Co-researchers had some experience both teaching and learning ancestral skills.
2. Co-researchers had stories of how and when Ancestral Skills Education made an impact on their lives.
3. Co-researchers were available for either an online interview using Google Meet or an in-person interview at the Fire to Fire gathering.

Patrick identified several co-researchers who might be willing to share their stories with me. He also encouraged me to post a request in the Between the Rivers Facebook group to see if I could find more co-researchers. Of the participants that Patrick recommended,

Rosemary and Karie agreed to participate in the study. Hari and Anna volunteered by responding to my post in the Between the Rivers Facebook group. I emailed a consent form and an explanation of research to each of these co-researchers. They returned the form prior to participation. These four co-researchers were interviewed and recorded using Google Meet in June of 2020.

Next, I attended the “Fire to Fire” gathering and the “Fire to Fire 2” gathering, held in late June and early August of 2020. These gatherings were held in Utah, during a lull in the pandemic, allowing us to gather in person. However, it was difficult to sit down and conduct interviews in person during these times. While the atmosphere at skills gatherings is normally conducive to slow activities and deep discussion, the pandemic seemed to reshape the use of down time at these events. Many of the participants were used to seeing each other regularly and felt as if they had been isolated since March. At this gathering, I shared a request for co-researchers at two of the morning meetings. As the result of one of these requests, I was approached by David Holladay. Holladay invited me to interview him, but we were not able to establish a time to meet. I did get the opportunity to attend one of his classes and experience his methods of sharing and discussing ideas. Holladay was mentioned by co-researchers and is also discussed in the literature as being one of the elders of the current ancestral skills movement, so the experience of his class helped me to understand more about the core ideas of Ancestral Skills Education.

I was only able to conduct two in person interviews, as social time was clearly the most important focus. Members of the group shared that they were unsure of what the pandemic would bring and when they would be next be able to spend time with their

friends. After making my announcements, David (co-researcher, not Holladay) found me and said that he would be happy to help, but I was unable to locate him for the rest of the week. I interviewed Daniel and Zac at the event. I also arranged to interview Bo and Scott in the weeks following the event. As I drove away from the event, Ben pulled up next to me and told me that he had a great story to tell and he would love to be a part of my research. I found David's email address and emailed him a request for an interview, which he accepted.

For each interview, I planned to sit down with co-researchers for about an hour. All but two occurred online. This was not my original intent, but due to the pandemic, this was a necessary way to safely communicate. Prior to the interview, each co-researcher received a letter discussing my research and the information that I intended to gather from them (Appendix B). One of the two interviews that occurred in person was conducted while we were out in the milieu of the gathering, so interruptions were frequent. Others would hear what we were talking about and came by to share their opinions. This was an interesting dynamic for my co-researcher, Daniel, who changed direction a bit and shared information that he may not have shared otherwise. This is a common occurrence at the gatherings, where conversations are often deep and thoughtful, on topics that would not normally be discussed with new acquaintances.

Technology made a few of the other interviews a struggle. Ben was driving across the country as we did our interview. We had several instances when his phone cut out and we had to restart. Rosemary was also driving, so some of her interview was difficult to transcribe, due to a poor connection. Rosemary, Ben, Karie and Hari did not use their camera for their interviews. It did make a difference whether the camera was on or off. It

did not necessarily affect the co-researchers' initial stories, but it did affect the flow of questions and answers after the initial story.

Prior to the interview, each participant was given a letter that described the information that I was trying to gather (Appendix B). The letter stated

“I would like for you to tell me the story of your journey with both Primitive Skills Education and your feeling of nature and community connectedness. In your initial 1/2 to 1 hour interview, I would like to hear about past experiences that stand out in your mind as creating that feeling of connectedness. I would also like to hear about the experiences that helped you to grow in that feeling of connectedness and learn more about the path that you followed. And finally, I would like to hear about how this feeling has changed your relationship with your community and with the environment. In this storytelling process, I am looking for accurate accounts, feelings and specific details, positive and negative.”

Open ended interviews are recommended by Moustakas (1994) as a way of gathering phenomenological data. At the beginning of each open ended interview, I read my interview protocol, which ended by asking the co-researcher to “take a few minutes of silence so that you can gather your thoughts. When you are ready, you can begin the conversation by describing a primitive skills experience that has come to your mind.” This moment of meditation was an effort to help my co-researchers move into the epoche process as described by Moustakas (1994). Co-researchers were then able to tell their story, beginning wherever they would like. If they were unable to continue or if they were struggling to figure out what to share, I used the following topical guide (Appendix C) to ask questions:

Tell me the story of one of your earliest memories of a primitive skills experience that helped to create your feeling of connectedness to nature and community.

Are there things about this experience that you think make it stand out to you?

How did this experience change your relationship with nature and the community?

Has your feeling of connectedness strengthened over time? If so, can you describe experiences that have strengthened it?

Are there other experiences along the way that you would like to share with me?

Can you describe the feeling of connectedness and how it has grown through your experience?

Interviews lasted anywhere between 20 minutes and 2 hours. Some co-researchers had stories that were well planned out and others shared a string of loosely connected events. Two of my co-researchers were very unsure of what to say, prompting me to ask almost all of my guiding questions. Each, though, had a story to share that strengthened the description of nature and community connectedness in ancestral skills education. After I completed the interviews, I transcribed them using NVivo's software transcription service. The transcriptions were not great for those who I had spoken with over the phone, so I had to go through and check each transcription, word by word. This need to edit the transcriptions allowed me to listen to each interview carefully, multiple times, before I began the process of data analysis.

Approach to Data Analysis

According to Moustaka (1994), the approach to phenomenological research follows four essential stages: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. The epoche process is undertaken before the researcher meets and interviews the co-researchers. This is a process of setting aside pre-judgements or what

the research feels that they already “know” about the phenomenon. It is also experienced in the first step of data analysis, the horizontalizing process, as the researcher gives each relevant interview statement equal weight (Moustakas, 1994).

Prior to beginning my interviews, I underwent my own epoche process, exploring my personal experience with Ancestral Skills Education. This process continued through my interviews, as each interview seemed to prompt a personal memory, related to the experience shared by a co-researcher. My co-researchers prompted me to evaluate my childhood experiences, which had not initially been a part of my epoche process. I realized that my initial definition of my personal experiences only addressed my adult life, as a student and as a mother, feeling connectedness on my own behalf and witnessing it on behalf of my children. When my co-researchers spoke about their childhoods, I also had to examine the role of ancestral skills in my own childhood as a catalyst for my interest in these skills as an adult. As part of the interview process, I encouraged each co-researcher to take a moment of meditation before they shared their stories, to encourage their own epoche process.

The process of phenomenological reduction was undertaken following the interviews. In this step, data was analyzed using a modified version of the Van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). This process involved the following steps:

1. After completing the transcription of each interview, I transferred it to a document and began the horizontalization process. In this process, I separated out statements and gave each statement equal weight.

2. I attempted to set aside my pre-judgements that had been formed by my own experience, exploring the possibility that every statement made by participants might be an invariant constituent of the experience. To find these, I asked myself if the statements were clear and if they were necessary for understanding the experience as a whole.
3. I grouped the statements into meaning units, and ultimately themes. These themes were generally based on community connectedness, nature connectedness and the life journey of participants, though the forms and contexts of this connectedness varied, ultimately leading to 13 unique themes.
4. I created a thematic portrayal for each theme, summarizing the statements into their key ideas. Each theme was checked against the initial transcript to justify its accuracy in describing the experience of participants. This was an important piece of data validation in my study. In this step, I also pulled out quotes that contained thick descriptions related to the theme.
5. Using this data, I created an individual textural description of their experience. This was the “what” or the facts of the experience, as perceived by my co-researchers.
6. Using imaginative variation and the thematic portrayals, I created a structural description of their experience. This was the “how”, the “why” and the conditions that created the experience for my co-researchers.
7. I pulled out a list of quotes that provided thick, rich descriptions and that could be used in the final textural-structural description.

8. I sent the textural description, structural descriptions, and list of quotes back to the co-researchers for corrections, clarifications and edits. The voice of the co-researchers is ultimately what is used to create the final textural-structural description, so it needed to be an accurate representation of the co-researchers' experiences. Six out of ten co-researchers provided minor edits for their description. One provided major edits, feeling that the content of the description needed to be clarified. This was the second step in providing valid results for my study.
9. I grouped the theme data and individual descriptions from all participants into one document. From this data, I developed a shared textural and a shared structural description of the phenomenon.
10. I created a final document containing both descriptions. From this, I developed a textural-structural description of the phenomenon.

For my initial textural and structural descriptions, each co-researcher was assigned their own Google Doc. Every step of the analysis process was documented in the version history of the Google Doc, making it easy to review the progression from horizontalization to textural and structural descriptions. Co-researchers' textural and structural descriptions, quotes, and themes were combined into a single document and this document was used to develop a textural and structural description of the phenomenon. Finally, these were placed in the same document and were used to develop the textural-structural description. The version history of the documents had the following structures, allowing for transparency in the process and creating opportunities for replication:

Documents 1-10:

Title: (Co-researcher First Name) Interview Analysis

Version History: Horizontalization, In Themes, Thematic Portrayal, Individual
Textural and Structural Descriptions

Document 11:

Title: Composite Textural and Structural Descriptions

Version History: Initial Themes for Composite, Invariant Meanings, Themes
Established, Organized into 3 Sections, Composite Textural and Structural
Descriptions

Document 12:

Title: Composite Textural-Structural Description

Version History: Descriptions Side-By-Side, Composite Textural-Structural
Description

Summary

This study was completed over the course of one year, from March of 2020 to March of 2021, using a transcendental phenomenological approach as outlined by Moustakas (1994). Two co-researchers were interviewed in person and eight co-researchers were interviewed over Google Meet in the spring and summer of 2020. These interviews were between 20 minutes and 2 hours long. NVivo software was used to transcribe the interviews. I worked on the individual analysis process from September to February. During this time, the interviews were split into their invariant horizons and placed in themes. Imaginative variation was used to explore the structure of the experiences. In February, each co-researcher was presented with a textural and structural

description for their verification. Then, these descriptions and thematic data were used to create the textural-structural description of the phenomenon. Each step of the analysis phase was preserved using the Google Docs version history feature.

Chapter 4: Analysis

The transcendental-phenomenological analysis of my co-researchers' interviews began with horizontalization, or determining the horizons of an experience for each individual participant. Once these horizons were determined, they were grouped into themes and interpreted as a thematic portrayal. The invariant horizons and themes were then used to create a textural and structural description of each individual's experience. These experiences were compiled to create a shared textural, structural and textural-structural description of the phenomenon. In this section, I will share a selection of invariant horizons and thematic portrayals for the thirteen themes identified by my co-researchers. Next, I will share the composite textural description and the composite structural description of the phenomenon. Finally, I present the composite textural-structural description of the experience of community and nature connectedness in ancestral skills education. Each co-researcher's story contributed important information to this research. Individual textural and structural descriptions are included in Appendix A.

Findings

Co-researchers identified thirteen themes that were essential to their experience of community and nature connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education. These themes fit into

three overarching categories: life journey and the real world, teaching and learning ancestral skills, and the gathering and skills community. Throughout each theme, co-researchers identified the differences between the connected world and the disconnected world, as if they had been initiated into the connected world and felt worried for those who had not. However, there was never a feeling that those who were connected were better than those who were not, nor was there a need to “save” the disconnected by sharing a worldview that they were not yet ready to hear. Karie, a co-researcher who moved from Seattle into a Yurt in Northern Idaho, gave my favorite description of how my co-researchers shared their knowledge. It is a phrase that I picked up and made use of a few times in this dissertation. My co-researchers are “passive activists”. They are working to help others find a feeling of connectedness by sharing their examples and by teaching ancestral skills to anyone who asks. In this chapter, I will share the thirteen themes and examples of invariant constituents and thematic portrayal for each. I will then share the composite textural description, composite structural description and composite textural-structural description of the experience of nature and community connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education.

Part 1: Life Journey and The Real World

The overarching category of life journey and the real world was composed of three themes: childhood, connecting with nature, and Western culture. Co-researchers shared stories from their own childhood and also discussed their hopes and worries about children today. When talking about connecting with nature, co-researchers identified feelings of safety, happiness and acceptance. Discussions of Western culture centered around what people didn’t know, or personally following the “wrong” path. In this

section I will share a selection of invariant constituents and a single thematic portrayal for each of the three themes.

Theme 1: Childhood. Examples from Zac and Karie demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Zac spoke about the lack of a mother figure in his life, “I feel like the outdoors, the earth mother, were kind of my nurturing, was what nurtured me as a child, kept me grounded and all the difficult and tough things I had to do with a child and as even as adult.”

Karie shared her childhood experiences in the outdoors,

You know, we grew up in that era of the 60s and 70s when we came home from school, you went outside and played and we had what we were playing in and making camp and all that kind of stuff and shelters and, so I was just kind of brought up that way.

Daniel’s individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Daniel’s childhood was full of experiences with nature. One of his earliest memories is when his yard flooded as a child. They found a piece of foam board and made a little boat. The water was only about 1.5 feet deep but the experience was magical and it felt like they were paddling around on their own little nature preserve. Another of his earliest memories was of going on hikes with his grandmother. His grandmother was a child during the depression and her family worked herding sheep. She pretty much lived outdoors. They didn’t have much, so they foraged plants and made herbal medicine. Every once in a while, the owner of the sheep would come up and give them flour to make bread. She didn’t go to school until she was 12 or 13 but Daniel observed that she

got the education she needed prior to that. When his grandmother took him on hikes, she would bring mayonnaise and bread. After hiking for a long time, they would sit down to eat. She would go and pick some watercress down by the river, putting it on the bread with the mayonnaise. This shaped Daniel's understanding of what it meant to be a grownup. Grownups were connected with nature and had all of that important knowledge. Daniel then moved to Alaska, where his parents started a Montessori school. Even though Nature Montessori wasn't really a thing at that point, it was a nature Montessori school. After school, Daniel remembered leaving the house and heading out to the creek. He and his sister learned so much by being out in nature and having unstructured time. It was dangerous - there were bears and other ways a kid could get hurt, but they knew their boundaries and stayed safe. His cousin got a Nintendo when he was young, but Daniel just couldn't sit still for long enough to play it. He didn't understand why everyone wanted to sit around and stare at a screen. When Daniel was a bit older, the family moved to Provo, Utah. He and his friends liked to play in a cornfield that was full of mice and snakes. One day, they decided to create a zoo and collected a bucket of mice and snakes for this purpose. After that, they went around to their other friends to try and get people to come see their zoo. When they returned to their basement, they found that the bucket was empty. Daniels mom was a very patient person, but this pushed her over the limit and she was pretty upset. They never did find most of the mice and snakes. Daniel feels like we are disconnected from life in nature. His dad worked on a farm and was out in nature every day. He noted that this was only a generation ago.

Theme 2: Connecting with Nature. Examples from Rosemary and Daniel demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Rosemary talked about people learning to value themselves through nature connection, “And I believe that when people learn to love themselves and they get that message from the environment that they have that love to share with others, you know, and we see that in the primitive [skills] community.”

Daniel spoke of the natural world as if it was his community,

If you go out into the mountains and you know the names of the plants and you know their personalities, their benefits and their uses then you're going to feel really comfortable, just like hanging out with friends that no matter who you're with or where you're at, if you know those things, you'd be really comfortable.

Anna's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Anna sees nature connection as both seeking the knowledge of the natural world and accepting the potential chaos and danger found in the natural world. She had an experience in the Kalahari where she startled a Kudu and it made a noise that caused her to feel like she was in danger. This experience made her aware of her own mortality. She also had an experience at home where she used plantain medicinally without understanding all of its properties, causing severe dehydration. Her time with the Bushmen in the Kalahari made her wish that she could feel the same kind of nature connection that they felt, when she was at home in Spokane.

Theme 3: Western Culture. Examples from Rosemary, Karie and Daniel demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Rosemary talked about how our culture is drawing us away from an understanding of our world, “I'm finding as one of the things that we are becoming disconnected about is how we buy our food in the store. We go in, we take it off the shelf, we toss it in the grocery

cart. Right. It's all about do I have the money to buy this right? Rather than do I have the skills, do I have the knowledge, do I have the connection. “

Karie lamented her choice in education, “And I picked computer science, the things I think about it, that's the only reason why I go to school, right? So that you can make money. I don't want my kids to grow up poor, so you can say I was way off my path at that point.”

Scott, through his spiritual awakening process, has discovered that the Western way might not be the best way,

And what we've been taught in Western culture is that ... we have to have goals and we have to be in charge and we have to have a plan and a structure and this is the way it's going to be. And what I've found is the opposite of that.

Daniel talked about how commercialism is taking us away from true connection,

And you watch TV and you're not creating your own stories. You're not telling people your stories. You're letting a multinational corporation come up with their stories and they are telling you the stories. And so you kind of lose that part of you.

Karie's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Karie felt a disconnect from modern culture and lifestyles from a young age. She felt “embarrassed to be a human” and didn't want to be someone who hurt the earth. She feels very comfortable in nature, but has always felt very different from the people around her. Karie feels that most people are “unconsciously living in a way that is excessive” and that we are surrounded with “commercialism and materialism”. These

things just never really resonated with her. Conversely, she feels a great connection to others who practice primitive skills, calling them her tribe, her people.

Part 2: Teaching and Learning Ancestral Skills

The overarching category of teaching and learning ancestral skills was composed of four themes: the skills, books, outdoor survival and wilderness therapy programs, and teaching. Co-researchers defined skills through their accessibility and connection, both culturally and spiritually. Books were identified as entry points and authors were considered to be initial mentors. Surprisingly, co-researchers who had worked in wilderness therapy as adults were significantly affected by the experience. Co-researchers described teaching as part of the cycle and stressed the importance of sharing information. In this section I will share a selection of invariant constituents and a single thematic portrayal for each of these four themes.

Theme 4: The Skills. Examples from Scott and David demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Scott spoke about the feeling of flow that he experienced while carving wood, “It's about learning more than carving something. And it's you know, it's the presence it's holding of the wood. It's the being in nature and all of that”

When discussing his experiences at ancestral skills gatherings, David shared,

I think there's something deep seeded within our psyche, within our soul that that speaks to us when we attend [skills gatherings], and I think that maybe the skills are a catalyst maybe for bringing that out, but that it reawakens something that's really dormant. ... You can't really place a value on that scientifically. You can't measure that. But I think that that's my experience anyway.

Rosemary's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Rosemary learned several skills in her childhood experiences at summer camp, including flint and steel fires, finding North by the stars and reading a map. She has witnessed many student transformations through learning skills, especially students who struggled to connect in the traditional world, like her granddaughter with RAD and a student with Autism. The bow drill is a central skill to Rosemary. She talks about teaching it in several contexts, to students of all ages. Felting is a skill that she felt she connected in one of her first skills gathering experiences and she has been practicing ever since. Now she raises her own sheep (Navajo Churro) for wool to use in felting. This skill has led her to learn more about the history of these sheep through a Navajo friend of hers. Rosemary feels that skills help everyone to connect across cultures and age groups. She teaches skills at a girls camp, like collecting water and starting fires with bow drill and flint and steel. Rosemary has also developed the skills to live off her own land by connecting with the plants that naturally grow in her area. Drum circles are “all about matching that heart rhythm” and Rosemary acknowledges that they come from a different culture than hers and finds value in learning the skills of that culture.

Theme 5: Books. Examples from David and Karie demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

David discussed the difficulty of having a deep desire to learn survival skills and only having books as mentors, “I would go to practice the things that Larry Dean Olsen taught in his book, but never really do anything with it.”

Karie shared this story about her childhood,

When I was eight years old, I read the book *My Side of the Mountain*. And ever since then, I just wanted to go out into the mountains and survive with nothing but my knife and do everything that this boy did in that book.

Zac's individual thematic portrayal demonstrates his desire to move from learning through books to learning from a mentor:

Zac moved into the world of ancestral skills education through survival books. Tom Brown was the author of the first survival book that he read. He remembered reading an article about Tom Brown when he was a teenager and searched for his books later in his mid 20s. It was important to Zac that Tom Brown talked about both the skills and the spiritual side of his connection to nature. Zac went on to take classes from Tom Brown because he felt such a strong connection with the books. Later, he learned many skills studying under John Olson. John had a book called "Spiritual Awakening" that helped Zac to learn meditation and to live in the moment.

Theme 6: Outdoor Survival and Wilderness Therapy Programs. Examples from

Anna, David and Daniel demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Anna talks about regaining our lost relationship with the natural community, "It's something we used to know how to be and I guess I would say primitive skills and wilderness awareness schools help us tap into that."

David shared his childhood experiences in the Boy Scouts, "And then I was in scouts. And that's where I was really introduced to the outdoors. And we did a lot of scouting stuff outdoors, hiking up in the Bob Marshall Wilderness area, Bitterroot Mountains."

Daniel spoke about the benefits of wilderness therapy concepts for all children,

I was speaking to a group back there and I was talking about the youth corrections program, these wilderness programs and why they work. One of the things I talked to the group about is that if we take these same principles and start applying them to kids before they end up in corrections, then you don't have to have them in corrections,

Bo's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Bo worked in Wilderness Therapy after finishing up his college degree. His experience in wilderness therapy helped him to connect with nature and to develop an understanding of how to work with teenagers. In wilderness therapy, Bo felt that his job was just to assess the kids and give them tools that they could choose to use to make their lives better. Nature provided the pressure and difficult situations for assessment.

Emotional safety was a theme in Wilderness therapy that Bo eventually connected to his feelings at the gatherings. Bo stated, "And after being there for a couple of years, I realized that I should be given all the money back because everything that they told us to teach the kids was life changing for us as instructors if we actually listened to it."

Theme 7: Teaching. Examples from Bo and Hari demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Bo shared his frustration with learning how to flintknap, "And it was because the people who are really good, they kept it secret because they make good money off of it. Right. They literally lived off of it. And they refused to teach people and That just pissed me off. "

Hari talked about a time when he taught smelting on a whim and inspired another teacher to learn more, "This is how this primitive stuff grows, you know, sharing that just turns in

so many directions so you don't think you're doing anything but then here's a guy that's ended up dedicating so much of his life to smelting, right.“

Karie's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Karie taught her first class, a drum making class, at Rabbitstick in 2007. She loves teaching, even though she is an introvert and is very shy. Teaching is no longer stressful for her, she sees it as sharing her passion with others, so she just lets the information flow naturally. The exception to that is her “All About Nettles” class where she has so much information to share and she wants to get it right. She uses notes for that class to make sure that she shares all of the correct information. It is very important to Karie that she shares the spiritual side of the skills. She feels that lots of teachers miss this, though some teach about the history of the skills. Looking back to the idea that Grandmother Margaret shared, that we are all living in the spirit world, Karie does not see a separation between the skills and the spirituality of the skills, so she wants her students to understand this as well. One example she gives is of teaching brain tanning and “reminding people that that deer, that hide, they're working on used to be a deer and that deer had stories and it has a spirit.” Karie struggles with the idea that many people are only interested in the skills when the economy is bad. When they are in “survival mode”, they say they want to learn the skills, but they are no longer interested when things get better. Karie believes that it is her purpose in the world to help people connect with the earth and that any experience might bring them closer if they can access and acknowledge their primal side. Even an act like foraging can awaken this part of them. Having both a physical and spiritual connection to a skill helps people to change their thinking and begin to access this part of them.

Part 3: The Gathering and Skills Community

The final overarching category includes five themes: the gathering community; giving back and alternative currency; our DNA and tribal ways; religion, spirituality and healing; music, drumming and dancing; and elders, mentors and fellow travelers. These themes address the community connectedness experienced by co-researchers, particularly at ancestral skills gatherings. The experience of emotional safety, spiritual connection, and belongingness to a group are shared across multiple themes. Co-researchers present many of these ideas as a re-awakening of the ideals and ways of their ancestors. In this section I will share a selection of invariant constituents and a single thematic portrayal for each of these six themes.

Theme 8: The Gathering Community. Examples from Bo, Hari and Ben demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Bo contrasted his experiences at art shows and rendezvous with ancestral skills gatherings, “And I think that that's the one the one way I would put it is at a gathering, I don't feel any ulterior motives. I don't feel like anyone's talking to me because they want something. I don't feel like anyone's there to fill up their wallet.”

Hari talked about how the gathering community inspires altruism, “Yeah, and I've thought about this a lot and I have a simple conclusion that we live in a world that is all about taking, whether it be taxes and infrastructure or for commerce and profit or whatever it is we live in a world, you know, that's about taking and skills Gatherings are about giving and sharing. It's a place where you can get that space.”

Ben shared his experience as he walked into his first gathering,

I had no idea what I was walking into, So I got through the gate and I saw the wall tents everywhere. And I was just blown away by what was going on and I saw people like living in a simple way. And I saw community and I saw people with smiles on their faces. And I thought to myself, like, I've been looking for this place for so long, like the day I was walking into it, I've been looking for this place. I didn't know it was there.

David's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

David's first gathering was Fire to Fire, the third year that it was held. He has also attended Rabbitstick. David feels that the gatherings are about more than just the skills. He has attended Mountain Man Rendezvous and the culture is just different. The gatherings are a place where everyone is accepted and where differences aren't focused on, but are still appreciated when they are brought to light. David has met and become friends with people who have very different beliefs from his Fundamentalist Mormon background. Scott Wright, a drummer and a friend, calls himself a "recovering mormon" and is able to share his beliefs with David in a nonjudgmental way. David also attends an annual new years party held in St George by "Tin Cup Chase", who invites people from all walks of life and all belief systems. David believes this is because organizers of the gatherings create this kind of culture, particularly Brad Wade of Fire to Fire. Rabbitstick seemed bigger to David, and more focused on the skills, but he still enjoyed meeting leaders in the primitive skills world, like Cody Lundin. When he and his wife came home with drums after their first Fire to Fire, it seemed counter to their culture and their children accused them of hanging out with "hippies". David admitted that some of them

probably are hippies, but most are “just people who are really kind of back to nature and finding peace and being with each other and with their creator, however they define that creator.”

Theme 9: Giving Back and Alternative Currency. Examples from Anna and Bo demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Anna talked about wanting others to feel what she felt with the Nharo Bushmen in the Kalahari, “And I want to be able to help other people get in touch with that experience of being human.”

Bo was amazed at the culture of the gatherings and tried to embrace the gift and knowledge giving community,

And they want to give, they want to give back because when they got there, everyone gave to them so much. And it's like this game, you know, give and take. And you can't keep up because people are giving to you more than you could ever give back.

Ben's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Ben's interpretation of currency is rooted in his world view and his understanding of what is important to people. He talked about being cash poor, but living like a king because he had plenty of food, enough produce to barter for meat and other things he might need. When he came to his first Rabbitstick, he did not have the money to pay his entry fee. However, he donated food to the kitchen and helped instructors by giving them materials. These materials were a combination of items that he had held in storage for years, things he could trade with his neighbors and even a road-killed deer that he had to find on the side of the road. In order to raise the entrance fee, Ben sat on the side of the

road and sold earrings. While he was selling the earrings, he realized that there were others, mainly instructors who were also cash poor but were excited to trade and gift him items. He got a buckskin vest and a pendant. He also gave someone a unicycle lesson. By the end of the week, Ben was told that he had contributed to the gathering by providing ideas and suggestions for improvement to the elders of the community. To Ben, this was confirmation that this group thought like him and saw that cash was only one form of currency.

Theme 10: Our DNA and Tribal Ways. Examples from Anna and Karie demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Anna marveled at the connection she felt with the Nharo Bushmen in the Kalahari, “And it's like, I don't know, a magic potion. I want more. I want to learn how to walk through the woods here in Spokane or north Idaho, where I grew up and be in tune the way that the Bushmen are in tune with the Kalahari.”

Karie talked about the spirituality of the skills, “You have a spiritual connection with nature and it's really ingrained in ourselves at the DNA level. And It's in all of us ... [as a] primal instinct, all these things about primitive skills.”

Scott's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Scott feels that many of the tribal and ancient ways of doing things are just in our DNA, so they make us feel connected when we experience them. He has had this connection with drumming, but also in his first real connective experience with sunflowers. Scott came to his understanding of the Sunflower Circle by looking at the medicine wheel and other cultures similar representations, what he calls a metaphor for life. He participated in an ayahuasca ceremony to help him explore and resolve some of

his inner struggles, feeling that this was an ancient way of working through and discovering personal truths. At one gathering, he participated in a drum circle and found that “experiencing the kind of drumming that they have at those events is pretty powerful because there's this primal sense of, you know, this is what we used to do when we lived in hunter gatherer communities and small tribes.” Scott helps people to heal by drumming on them, using vibrations to help their bodies process and become “unstuck”. He feels that the skills gatherings are a place of connectedness because the people there understand the need for the old ways and it’s like “going back in time”.

Theme 11: Religion, Spirituality and Healing. Examples from Anna and Rosemary demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Anna shared her experience of singing in the sunshine with women in the Kalahari, “People say that God is powerful or that God cares enough to send rain or sunshine. But how many people actually live that connection?”

Rosemary shared many examples of what she felt was the creator’s work,

And then all of a sudden there is nature. Is it filled with the imaginative work of the creator? You go into the red rocks of the desert and you're like, this is totally different. And this has a different kind of beauty to it. I think that nature gets your imagination going, the variety of it, the uniqueness of it.

Karie’s life was changed when she went and saw Grandmother Margaret speak about the spiritual world,

The spirit is all around us, it's in us, it's around us, it's in the trees, it's in the plants. And just that concept of being, living in a dualistic world creates that

division. You know, when [Grandmother Margaret] said that, I was just kind of blown away but at the same time, I was like well duh, Of course.

Zac's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Finding connectedness to all things is a central theme in Zac's life. It began when he was a child and felt that the natural world was his mother figure. Zac believes in the Native American view of spirituality, where all things have a spirit, but also believes in God, "the creator". He feels that we are all creators, but that there is a creator who made this earth for us, revealing himself through "animals, plants, humans, the rocks". Zac believes "when you create something ... you reveal something about yourself." If we can slow down and really be aware of those things, we can feel the connectedness. Zac's life goal has been to feel that connectedness to and awareness of all things. It is important to him that both of his initial mentors (Tom Brown and John Olsen) connected spirituality to the primitive skills.

Theme 12: Music, Drumming and Dancing. Examples from Scott and Zac demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Scott shared a pivotal moment when he experienced music on a spiritual level, "And I kind of had this moment. It was like, this is what I want to do. I just want to play music. I just want to be in rhythm with people and gather around fires. And it was a real deep connection to that."

Zac talked about how drumming was really about creating community and connection between the drummers, "just come, drum, go with the beat, enjoy yourself and have fun."

Hari's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Music is an important part of the gatherings to Hari. He feels that this is a way that we can all communicate, even across cultures. The music is not commercial and is often spontaneous. The drum beats that happen at the gatherings give everyone a rhythm and make people feel comfortable. Kids hear music and they are just naturally inclined to dance, even though they've never been taught how. Hari moved away from bow and paddle making and started making diddley bows at the gatherings. He loves the diddley bow because it is simple, can be made out of everyday materials, and he really likes blues music. The diddley bow feels like an idea that traveled with African people on slave ships, then became a reality with whatever materials they had available.

Theme 13: Elders, Mentors and Fellow Travelers. Examples from Scott, Hari, Bo and Ben demonstrate some of the characteristics of this theme:

Scott made sure to give respect to all of his elders and mentors, "And you know, Larry Dean Olsen, we can't forget to mention Larry Dean because he's really the one that started all this."

Hari spoke about a beloved teacher who had recently passed away,

I actually got to take Knot Allen's fire class and watch the twenty seven different ways to make a fire, and I'm sure glad I did, because he's gone now....Did you know you could put ashes in a Cotton Ball, spread it out like a joint, roll it between a couple of two by fours and have it burst into a coal?

Bo was honored to get to flintknapping with someone who he knew to be an expert at many skills,

I was like, oh, man, I've been hearing about you for years. I've always wanted to meet you. So now it's just flattering to have you come over to the knapping pit

and hang out with me. And, you know, I can joke with him. And he's you know, it's somebody that I heard of and knew of. And now he's a buddy.

Ben talked about his conversation with an elder at Rabbitstick at the end of his first gathering,

He said, well, You don't know who you talked to this week, but you just ran around and you ran your mouth the whole week. And you planted a bunch of seeds in the minds of the elders at this gathering. And now, we couldn't imagine having another gathering without you in it.

Scott's individual thematic portrayal shares many common experiences from this theme:

Scott has had several mentors in his journey. Andrew Dahl-Bredine first got him into drumming at Winter Count, in 2012. They had similar life experience as they had both travelled to Brazil and experienced that culture, so they bonded on that. The next year, he was introduced to a drummer and instrumentalist named Poranguí, who helped him to connect to music on a deeper level. In 2014, Scott had a transformative experience, listening to music at Poranguí's camp. He felt connected to everyone and could see that each person played a small part in the creation of the music. Scott also feels that it is important to honor all of the people who have significantly contributed to the skills gathering community, beyond just the musical aspect.

Composite Textural Description

In this study, ten co-researchers described their experiences with ancestral skills education over the course of their lives. Their experiences fell into three distinct categories: the path that led them to the practice of ancestral skills (and the path that others have not yet found), the reciprocal journey of learners and teachers, and their

experience of community in ancestral skills gatherings and groups. This textural description documents the “what” of these experiences, sharing specific details that exemplify the shared experiences of community and nature connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education.

Life Journey and The Real World

Childhood was a time where many co-researchers first experienced nature and ancestral skills. As children, they played in the woods, made forts and explored their backyards, neighborhoods and local wild areas. One co-researcher noted, “There just wasn't alternatives, right? You didn't play inside, you played outside.” Sometimes they would explore with parents and grandparents. Some continue this tradition of exploration with their own children, grandchildren, or children that they mentor. In these explorations, skills would be passed down through informal lessons and experiential learning. One co-researcher recalls a grandmother who would pick watercress for lunch during long hikes,

She put that on the bread with the mayonnaise and she gave it to me and when you're 5, you just kind of eat what someone gives you, you know, and you're grateful for it. It's not a big deal. So I thought that was normal.

Another recalls that her father would play stalking and awareness games with his students at their local school and that students “played in the woods every day at recess”. Co-researchers hunted, fished and went on life changing backpacking trips. For some, those early experience did not feel transformational, just like something they did,

I did a lot of camping and fishing and hunting and all of those things as I was growing up as a child, but never saw them as really a healing thing or something that could help me see or connect to myself or nature or anything else better.

One participated in a summer camp, where she learned skills like starting fires, reading maps and navigating by the stars. Another participated in Boy Scouts and spent weekends learning skills out in the wilderness. In childhood or early adulthood, many co-researchers were influenced by books that they read. These books range from children's books like *My Side of the Mountain* or *Andrew Henry's Meadow* to survival literature, like *The Tracker* and *Outdoor Survival Skills*. The books resonated with co-researchers and they felt like they had a connection with someone who understood their desire for a meaningful and interactive connection to nature. For some, these books prompted them to enroll in survival courses and learn more. One stated, "and I started reading [Tom Brown's] books and they connected me so much and connected with me so much that I had to actually go to the school and experience that." For others, these books sat with them while they lived their normal lives, internally fueling their search for kindred spirits. One co-researcher read *My Side of the Mountain* and "just wanted to go out into the mountains and survive with nothing but my knife and do everything that this boy did in that book."

Co-researchers either experienced a deep connection with nature early on, or felt like they had an amazing life transformation once they found that connection. Two co-researchers could not recall a time when nature connection and ancestral skills were not a part of their lives. This connection was just a part of how they have always lived. Others experienced a time of disconnect from nature, a time when they felt lost and unhappy.

Two co-researcher found their deep connection on a trip to the wilderness as teenagers, but then moved away from that connection. One co-researcher described the connection she felt in the back country, “I remember walking across the meadow, Bechler Meadows, as a thunderstorm rolled in and just feeling that warm breeze on my face and realizing that I never wanted to be without this again.” Several co-researchers were drawn into life in western culture, going to college and trying to make money, as one lamented, “that's the only reason why I go to school, right? So that you can make money. I don't want my kids to grow up poor.” Then they had a transformational experience that reminded them of the need for nature connection in their lives. These experiences often prompted a major life change, centered around buying a piece of property or moving to a new place. One co-researcher recalled when she worked in the software industry in Seattle and made the decision to move out to the country, “and I just remember sitting in this traffic and I looked at the smog and I was like, this isn't leaving. This is here. I have to move.” She now lives in a yurt with no electricity or running water. Living simply was a theme for a few co-researchers that helped them to feel more connected to nature. Whether they lived in a yurt, on a farm or in town, they felt secure in their ability to live minimally. One co-researcher described the opportunities on her property,

For instance, we have stinging nettle on our property, we can boil up stinging nettle. It's like spinach, you know, it's a vegetable you can eat. We have willow on our property, we can create willow baskets. We have clay on our property, we can create clay. We raise our own sheep. And so we're not worried about the meat or even I milk the sheep and I create soap and stuff like that from the sheep milk and, you know, and cheese.

Co-researchers had many positive experiences bringing children, clients and students into nature. Four co-researchers worked in wilderness therapy programs at some point in their lives. Each credited their time leading wilderness therapy expeditions as a source of deep connection for themselves, though they saw mixed results with clients. There was a general acknowledgement that even if clients did not accept the help they were given, the experience would have had an impact on their lives,

and after being there for a couple of years, I realized that like I should be giving all the money back because everything that they told us to teach the kids was life changing for us as instructors if we actually listened to it.

Co-researchers who worked with children shared that many behavioral issues and disabilities fade away when there is a nature and community connection. One talked about her granddaughter's experience at an ancestral skills gathering,

You know, my granddaughter connected to other people. And RAD ... is something that stops people from connecting... But she connected to her teachers who just very patiently taught her how to start a bow drill fire.

...

It just became like this blossoming door that opened for. So my granddaughter now loves geology because she watches Flintknapping. She's looking at rocks all the time and she walks and that started because she got curious about a bow and arrow and shooting a bow and arrow and oh, what kind of a rock makes an arrowhead.

Another described a bow making class where a student with ADHD was able to focus and complete a bow, even though his mom was worried and said that he was unable to

focus in school. Co-researchers were worried about the lack of connection they see in both kids and adults. One co-researcher felt the urgency to help kids “make that nature connection before they get seduced by the world”. Co-researchers noted that people no longer know where their food comes from and can be both excited and afraid when they go exploring just 100 yards from the road. For many co-researchers, nature connection is not just about being in nature, it is about interacting with nature, whether that means collecting sticks and lighting a fire or eating a plant that is located inside a classroom. One co-researcher stated, “If you want kids to appreciate and preserve nature, get them to start eating nature. When they're eating nature, then they have that connection right now.”

Co-researchers experienced society’s mistrust and fear of nature on either a personal level or as something that they witnessed and actively worked to change. As they are more connected with nature, they can clearly see the disconnect that most of their friends and family have. One co-researcher noted

And I've had friends in Portland call and be like ... can you share with us what you know, and then they're in survival mode and all of a sudden they want to learn these things. But once the economy is good again, they're going to go back to the candy and forget about it. Because it's too hard, it's too much work.

A few co-researchers had a time in their lives where they were “divorced” from nature. They lived the lives that they thought they were supposed to live, making money and supporting their families. Some experienced a “spiritual awakening” and returned to their connection with nature and the ancestral skills community as a result of this process. One rekindled his connection in his backyard, “And so in planting the garden, in the sunflower circle, I started to have a deeper, deeper connection.” Others found their reconnection by

attending an ancestral skills gathering. One co-researcher recalls walking into Rabbitstick, seeing people living happily and simply, and realizing that he had finally found his people,

So I got through the gate and I saw the wall tents everywhere. And I was just blown away by what was going on and I saw people, like, living in a simple way. And I saw community and I saw people with smiles on their faces. And I thought to myself, like, I've been looking for this place for so long ... I've been looking for this place. I didn't know it was there.

The constraints and conformities of society caused a great deal of unhappiness for many co-researchers. One felt like she just never fit in and did not understand modern culture. She said, "I still have issues with the two legged. I still have disconnect, but at the same time I am learning compassion." Others tried to practice their skills within the boundaries of society by travelling and selling their crafts. Events like rendezvous and barter fairs provided a venue for selling and gathering with likeminded people. One co-researcher spoke of the friendships he made working security at a barter faire, "And security at the barter fair at that time was a bunch of people in highland garb with swords walking around, making sure that people behave themselves. Which was a blast, right, and so that kind of got me excited about swords." However, because they were based on commerce, they had a very different feel from ancestral skills gatherings,

At a rendezvous or an art show ... you're surrounded by a lot of things with ulterior motives. And I think that that's the one way I would put it is at a gathering, I don't feel any ulterior motives. I don't feel like anyone's talking to me because they want something. I don't feel like anyone's there to fill up their wallet.

They're trying to fill up their heart and their mind and their skill set. And some people are there just to be there. Some people are there because they're working on something. Some people are there because they just feel like they need to share because someone has shared so much with them. That's what I like. It's like everything around you is real and there's no worry.

Teaching and Learning Ancestral Skills

Ancestral skills are defined in a very broad way. The following skills were discussed by co-researchers, but are not offered as an exhaustive list: cordage, fire starting with various methods, navigation, foraging, plant identification, plant medicine, plant spirit medicine, animal spirit medicine, felting, animal processing, brain tanning, drumming, making instruments, making furniture, flint knapping, making bows, tracking, making knives, metal forging, sound baths, camouflaging, water purification, pottery, making corn husk dolls, and storytelling. Some just called it “living simply”. One co-researcher felt that the act of creating from natural materials requires a level of intimate involvement with nature,

When you work with natural materials, versus working with manufactured materials, there's a lot of problem solving

...

If we were to go out and want to make a bow from a piece of Juniper or Maple ... then we have to think that we have all the knots and the way the grain's going and the effect of the sun and climate on the trees and how that's affecting all of those things that create little problems to be solved.

Several co-researchers felt a deep connection to the skills that they primarily practice, though all felt driven to learn new skills. All co-researchers had experiences with at least one of the core skills of cordage, flint knapping and making fire. For most, these experiences were central first experiences in their ancestral skills journey. A co-researcher described the excitement and mystery of these survival skills,

what I've learned with my various teachers with wilderness awareness schools is that nature is both an opportunity for that joy that, like, amazing joy of making your first fire or creating this gorgeous piece of twine, which is now a bracelet around my wrist.

...

But it's also equally an opportunity for just a reminder that there is there is danger and and that I could die even, even when I'm doing something that is good for me, if I don't know all the things that I need to know, I could die from what I'm doing

Another common avenue to practicing ancestral skills was through outdoor survival schools and other courses. One co-researcher participated in the Boy Scouts as a child and another participated in summer camps. Several co-researchers participated as guides in wilderness therapy programs. While they were actually staffing these excursions, the training they received and the experiences they had while putting their training into action were life changing. For each, though they did that work when they were in their late teens and early twenties, the experiences still shape their perception of the world. While most co-researchers did not cite experiences in survival schools, one did attend Tom Brown's Trackers school. Another went on a trip to the Kalahari with Jon Young and attended wilderness awareness schools.

Books and videos provided a first point of connection with ancestral skills for some co-researchers. Some connected with books as children and others found books when they had an interest in a particular skill and wanted to know more. In the latter case, it was hard to find books sometimes and even when they could be found, the instructions in books did not compare to the experience of learning from another person. Some found community in books because they felt like this was their only chance for connection. At least they knew that there were others out there who had similar interests. Larry Dean Olsen and Tom Brown's books were mentioned by some co-researchers. One noted that Brown's books were important to him because they didn't just talk about the skills, they talked about the spirituality of nature connection.

Teaching is important to the culture of the ancestral skills community. Most co-researchers taught in some way. Some came to ancestral skills gatherings as teachers. Others came as students, but freely shared their knowledge with other students. Many shared skills outside of gatherings through informal interactions with friends and family. For several co-researchers, teaching went beyond just sharing skills, it was an opportunity to remind others that the skills could help them to create a spiritual connection to nature,

When I teach my classes, I'm always talking about the spiritual aspect of that skill, whether it's brain tanning and, and reminding people that that deer that hide, they're working and used to be a deer and that deer had stories and it has a spirit.

When teaching, some co-researchers felt stressed out and unable to slow down. This caused them to burn out of their teaching responsibilities quickly and reinvent their role at the gatherings. For one co-researcher, he was "humbled and honored" when he was asked to be an instructor. It was a sign that he had become a full member of the

community. For all, teaching was a piece of the process, a move from being mentored to being a mentor. No one mentioned a financial transaction between students and teachers, teaching was viewed as an act of giving back to their community. This behavior was modelled by David Holladay to one co-researcher, when he said, ““You know, I'm not here to make money. I'm just here to teach.”

The Gathering and Skills Community

Co-researchers made their way to ancestral skills gatherings in different ways, but many seem to have been brought by a family member or a fellow traveler. The story of this connection mattered enough for them to share it as part of their experience. One fellow traveler was picked up off the side of the road, another was followed as a mentor. Some were children, siblings, and friends. When they arrived, they felt like they were with their own kind, even though the people at the gatherings came from a variety of backgrounds and belief systems. Co-researchers marveled at the fact that everyone could get along and live in harmony, even though they had very different religious backgrounds, political beliefs and past experiences,

Because we're people who are celebrating what we've done, what our ancestors have done. We're celebrating a passion we have for these things. That's what matters. And we're going to leave our political stuff aside and not even bother with that, because the community is so much more of a value.

One co-researcher compared gatherings to the environment of wilderness therapy programs, “a constantly emotionally safe environment.” Another called it a space where you could find peace with being with each other and with your creator.

Gatherings were a place where co-researchers found connection with their ancestors,

So when I do these skills, when I attend these gatherings, I kind of do feel a little bit more connected in some way to my ancestors. And it kind of gives me more clarity as far as what my purpose is or what my visions are is the future and that kind of thing.

Even though they are similar in size, the environment is vastly different from that at rendezvous, as they are designed for sharing ideas, not for selling products. Each gathering has a different feel, different traditions and different participants. Some, like Rabbitstick, are very large and some, like Fire to Fire, are very small. While they might do some things differently, co-researchers identified common elements to the culture of gatherings that they had attended, which created an environment for both nature and community connection. These cultural characteristics included: sharing ideas and having your ideas accepted, showing respect for elders and teachers, allowing kids to play and grow in a safe space, and giving back to the community. While the skills are technically the reason for gatherings, several co-researchers said that they go to gatherings because of the way they can experience connection to the community. The “skills are secondary”.

Gatherings are spaces where those who might be categorized as having disabilities in the outside world are able to find acceptance. One co-researcher was thrilled that her granddaughter with RAD was able to build a bow drill, shoot a bow and arrow and start to learn about Native American history. She had also witnessed a student with autism connecting with others through pottery. Another co-researcher told the story of a participant with autism, who had been asked to leave at one point because he was

being very disrespectful to elders and teachers. Once that participant was able to change his behavior, he was welcomed back and accepted by the group. Now people look to him as an expert and come to him when they need help on a project. Another had many experiences with children who had been labeled as having disabilities or behavioral issues. At the Fire to Fire gathering, he taught a child whose mom stated that he had ADHD and just could not sit still. That child was able to make a bow and focus on a project for several hours.

Co-researchers had a very different understanding of currency. Time, skills and trade items were considered to be much more valuable than money. Giving back and sharing the knowledge that had been given to them, was a theme across all co-researchers, regardless of their participation as a teacher or as a student,

And as we [share skills], we free the individuals in the community so that those that the layers, the cultural layers that tend to control the community kind of melt away, because when one culture doesn't have power over another, you can't threaten my survival, you know, because I know how to I know how to take care of myself.

Many felt that they had tried to live the socially accepted life, pursuing wealth and material things and had been left feeling empty by the process. One co-researcher felt that it was her purpose on earth to help people connect to nature, so she gave up her lucrative software job. Another sold her house, moved to a farm and teaches skills on her 16 acres. Financial constraints are an important consideration, but many co-researchers have found a way to move into a life where they live simply and practice their skills daily. Several co-researchers identified the importance of sharing the skills and passing them along, “to

help other people get in touch with that experience of being human.” Two co-researchers shared the struggles with getting information when they first started out, as most people were competitive and did not share their knowledge. They both wanted to share the skills with others and break that cycle, “the people who are really good, they kept it secret because they make good money off of it, right, they literally lived off of it. And they refused to teach people and that just pissed me off.”

One co-researcher actually went to live with a tribal community, the Nharo Bushmen in the Kalahari, “It feels since then as though everything else that I experience is in light of this tribe, because it feels to me like what they experience is what humanity is meant to experience”. The feeling of nature and community connectedness that she described was similar to the descriptions of ancestral skills gatherings. She noted acts of child rearing, peer responsibility and community decision making that were very different from what we see in Western culture, but similar to acts mentioned by other co-researchers at ancestral skills gatherings. The theme of simple and happy living was evident throughout all co-researchers’ experiences. A few co-researchers mentioned our DNA, stating that ancestral skills activities, particularly drumming, felt like a connection with some part of us that we had lost. Some skills fostered a deep connection to our prehistoric past,

I believe that there is something within us that when we actually start to practice different skills, that there's, I think there's something genetically that has been asleep for thousands or millions of years or something in us that comes alive, that really speaks to us and that we can connect with our ancestors in that way.

Other skills created a connection to a co-researcher's personal cultural history, "The felting I do has its roots in my own culture, which is around the Ukraine and around the Slavic community."

Seven co-researchers discussed the role of religion in their ancestral skills journey. Four of those are (or were at some point) Mormon, one was Catholic, one belonged to a living room fellowship, and one simply referenced 'the creator'. Their journey includes a spiritual component, and embraces the idea that all of nature needs to be respected. One co-researcher wondered, "if nature connection will lead humanity back into an intimacy with the divine that is not full of the baggage that religions have weighed us down with and really wounded humanity with." For some, ancestral skills are a way to connect with their creator, regardless of the way they define the creator, "each of us is a creator in my eyes and each of us were born to be creators like the creator himself." These co-researchers were careful to define the creator, expressing that it was ok for people to have their way of knowing the creator. Regardless of their Christian background, many embraced the idea that plants and animals are complex beings with their own spirits. One Mormon co-researcher stated, "I think there's so many things that are spiritual, I guess I go back to the spiritual quite a bit. There's so many spiritual occurrences that are happening within humans as well as within animals and plants". Some have completely veered away from Western religious practices, participating in activities like Ayahuasca ceremonies, Reiki, shamanic training, sound baths, and vision quests. Several co-researchers cited their initial knowledge about Native American religion and Indigenous ways of seeing the world as the catalyst for their spiritual training. Even those who were devout to their Christian beliefs incorporated some of the

ideas that they had experienced at ancestral skills gatherings or with Indigenous people into their new understanding of the world and the creator. After witnessing a change in the weather while a group of women in a Nharo Bushmen village sang, one co-researcher observed, “People say that God is powerful or that God cares enough to send rain or sunshine. But how many people actually live that connection?”

Music was an important part of ancestral skills gatherings, and was cited by eight co-researchers as a skill that they practice regularly. Dancing together was a central theme for creating community. Two co-researchers talked about Mask Night, a drumming and dancing event at Rabbitstick, as a pivotal moment in their lives. They felt the connection to the community, after they got past the embarrassment and uncomfortable feelings that came from their experience in Western culture. One co-researcher described his first experience in the Mask Night drum circle,

and I sat in the back of the drum circle. Very intimidated with this little frame drum, and I didn't want to throw anything off. I didn't want to, you know, bang on the drum and have everyone stare at me. I was kind of embarrassed and kind of in this place of fear. But as the night went on, it got easier and easier to participate.

...

And it's not like a hedonistic way of just letting go and everyone running around naked. It was everyone really, truly just expressing, is the only way I could put it. And as I experienced that, I started to express and I started to express and banging on that drum by the end of the night that the ball on the end of my drumstick had come off and was no longer working. So my connection to the drumming that

night was very... amazing. I just felt something about it. So that was just the beginning.

...

And it was really a beginning of me understanding that, you know, I have this

little part in this and so does everybody else. And we started to just make magic.

Drumming was an activity that could be learned by anyone and was promoted by one co-researcher's mentor as a community building activity rather than a purely musical activity. People connected with the rhythms and the vibrations rather than by recognizing a popular song, "we communicate at a feeling level outside of intellect" and "we have a connectivity through music because that's the nature of music." Two co-researchers were self proclaimed introverts, and were able to bond and communicate in a different way through drumming. Drumming was discussed by almost all of the co-researchers as a form of community building, whether it was at ancestral skills gatherings or as part of local drumming groups,

Anybody can drum. So nobody needs to be excluded. And you don't have to use the words for people to come together and feel good about things. It's almost like a voice, but it's a universal voice that you can't get to interpret it poorly or wrong. And I think people can bond over drumming.

Co-researchers were careful to share the sources of their knowledge regardless of whether they had learned at a survival school, gathering or in an informal way. Specific skills were tied to specific people. For example, one participant learned pottery, flint knapping, edible plants from John Olson. David Holladay shared philosophies around the campfire and acted as a mentor to one co-researcher until he was ready to be a teacher.

Hawk made sure that if you took his class, you would be willing to share your knowledge with others. Andrew Dahl-Bredine and Poranguí provided the experiences and scaffolding to help one co-researcher become a drummer. DJibril helped another. Digger taught the core skills and provided the path for one co-researcher to join the ancestral skills community, “And then I saw how he lived. He had his yurt that he built himself and all his furniture he made and, you know, living totally primitive and he was just a big inspiration and just opened doors to the gatherings and to all of us and to this whole community that I didn't know existed”. Co-researchers were not only careful to cite the sources of their knowledge, they honored the people who came before their sources and they honored the people who organized the gatherings and the people who have passed away. David Wescott, Patrick Farneman and Brad Wade were mentioned numerous times by co-researchers, as mentors, guides and simply as the creators of their gathering experience. Tom Brown and Larry Dean Olsen were often looked to as the fathers of the skills movement and were honored accordingly. There was a general feeling that if people didn't learn that knowledge, it could be lost forever. One co-researcher was grateful that he got to take Knot Allen's fire making class before he passed away,

I actually got to take Knot Allen's fire class and watch the twenty seven different ways to make a fire, and I'm sure glad I did, because he's gone now. Did you know you could put ashes in a cotton ball, spread it out like a joint, roll it between a couple of two by fours and have it burst into a coal? Wow. Incredible things.

While each co-researcher's experience was unique, many shared experiences delineated the horizons of this phenomenon. Often, a co-researcher's life experience

dictated the way that they described an event and they stepped into the experience, but once they stepped in, many of those differences faded away to reveal some clear boundaries of community and nature connectedness through ancestral skills education. Learning ancestral skills helped co-researchers feel more connected to nature, to their community and to themselves. The stories that they shared demonstrated a journey to the connected world. Co-researchers were aware that their connectedness played an important role in their lives and desired to help others find this connectedness. In the next section, I explore the “why” behind these experiences and the circumstances that created these experiences.

Composite Structural Description

The structural description, according to Moustakas (1994), reveals the dynamics that underlie the co-researchers’ experiences. Using imaginative variation, the researcher explores the themes of the phenomenon and the conditions that create it. The following section explores the structure of co-researchers’ experiences as described in the previous section. Time and environment, key elements of this structure, play out for each co-researcher as a journey from the disconnected to the connected world, and as the establishment of their role in the disconnected world once they had experienced connectedness. Co-researchers’ experiences were also defined by the power of acceptance and safety within a group of people, allowing them to feel vulnerable and explore their spirituality within that group.

Life Journey and The Real World

Childhood was freedom, a time when co-researchers explored the woods and interacted with nature in an unhindered way, “we were aware and careful, but we were also able to be very engaged in nature.” Childhood experiences in nature did not feel like major connections or life events, they just felt normal. Co-researchers were deeply concerned about how and when the current generation of children spent time in nature, whether they were their own children or children in their community. They were worried that children would be afraid of nature if not properly introduced. Co-researchers felt that nature connection was central to the human experience. They had experiences with children who did not have interactions with nature, watching them struggle with choices and even go down the road of incarceration, “if we take these same principles [of wilderness therapy] and start applying them to kids before they end up in corrections, then you don't have to have them in corrections”. Co-researchers also witnessed many instances where children (and adults) had been diagnosed with a disorder that became less prominent and relevant in a natural setting. These experiences led them to believe that these disorders are a result of our culture and could be easily managed in a setting like an ancestral skills gathering, “I have another young lady who came [to Rabbitstick] and she was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. But once again, she started interacting with students because she started to feel like, I can do this. I can connect these students with the pottery that I'm doing.” Those co-researchers who had a childhood connection to nature, followed by a disconnect from nature, experienced a deep feeling of loss. Those who had this experience did not recognize that they were mourning the loss of nature connectedness until they had the opportunity to reconnect. Experiences in early adulthood, when the experiencer was able to process their relationship to nature with

newly adult eyes, were transformative and foundational for many adult behaviors. Time in the wilderness, in particular, was experienced with eyes that had begun to recognize that this time is special and had been lost in the every day experiences of Western culture.

Co-researchers tied issues in our Western world to a lack of connection to each other and to nature. Co-researchers were raised to be individualistic and competitive but recognized that these qualities were responsible for many of our cultural struggles,

[people are] so individualistic where their opinions and their ideas are more important than, you know, being right is more important than having the community and the connection. And I don't think they realize it consciously, but I think that's kind of how it works.

These qualities also directly affected the path taken by many co-researchers' lives on a personal level as they pursued money and material things, driving some co-researchers to work in professions that made them unhappy. Issues that plague our society seemed to fade away in more natural settings and through living a simple lifestyle. Getting out of the “rat race” and choosing to live simply felt like a life-saving choice for those who experienced it, and one that has not led to any major regrets. When keeping one foot in both worlds and selling goods that were made through knowledge of ancestral skills (like bows or stone tools), one co-researcher discussed how the world of commerce and competition is in conflict with the values of ancestral skills practitioners, “So I've gotten a lot of hate email over my years about why are you teaching people and why do you sell your stuff so cheap? You're taking food off my table.”

One co-researcher described herself as a “passive activist”, saving the world by example and by sharing her knowledge. This label could be easily applied to all co-

researchers as they are grateful that they have had life experiences that showed them the path of connectedness and want to share this opportunity with others. They don't see themselves as righteous or right, being careful to not promote their way as the only way. They see the issues in society and they want to make a difference. Some venture out into their local communities to make a difference and some have changed professions so that they can share their knowledge. For others, the safest place for them to make a difference is at an ancestral skills gathering. One co-researcher described this part of the culture of the gatherings,

I've thought about this a lot and I have a simple conclusion that we live in a world that is all about taking, whether it be taxes and infrastructure or for commerce and profit or whatever it is we live in a world, you know, that's about taking and skills gatherings are about giving and sharing. It's a place where you can get that space.

Teaching and Learning Ancestral Skills

Co-researchers were partially motivated to learn the skills because they produced a feeling of deep connection to their ancestors, like a way to get in touch with a piece of themselves that has been asleep for thousands of years. Practicing skills created a pathway to a deep, peaceful feeling of nature and community connectedness, a feeling that some felt they had been looking for their entire lives. While some eventually settled on one skill that was "their skill", all of the skills were still equally fascinating and exciting. Skills also opened them up to the understanding that they are not dominant over nature, they are a part of nature. Once they had this new awareness, they realized that not having skills and not being reverent to their relationship with nature could be dangerous.

When they had that shift in perception, they began to see the plants and animals around them as fellow travelers or even guides, who deserve respect and care,

Here's an example of that. When Brad and I were down at the land, there in Tabiona where the Fire to Fire gathering is. And we were having a conversation about, you know, should we do this or not? And we're really having a deep moment, it was a very meditative contemplating moment standing there by the river, our feet dangling in the water. And this peregrine falcon comes flying down the river and just buzzed right over our heads. And our yurt we were staying in was down the river about 100 yards and we could see it and the peregrine flew right past us just as we were talking about this and landed on the yurt where we'd been staying.

The practice of skills helped practitioners to move into a meditative state and experience a state of flow, producing a healing effect for some co-researchers. Learning skills without acknowledging the spiritual and connective components did not invoke the same feelings of nature or spiritual connection, though feelings of community connectedness were still present. For those who were concerned with the spirituality of the skills, this spirituality did not interfere with their religious beliefs and were easily incorporated into their religious viewpoint.

Mentors who were willing to share their knowledge with co-researchers were important parts of their journey. When mentors were hard to come by, co-researchers turned to books, creating a different feeling of connection (not necessarily connectedness),

And so the books gave me the technical basics to experiment, but things like the bowyer's Bible series, it does give you a sense of community because there is a community of bow makers that are communicating with each other and each one has a different aspect that they share and contribute. You're learning that you're part of a long chain of history. You have some element of connection there.

Tom Brown and Larry Olsen were invisible, internal mentors to some who could not find mentors in the physical world. However, invisible mentors weren't quite good enough, so some didn't stop their search until they found a mentor who was willing to pass down their knowledge. Mentors didn't just teach the skills, they also taught practitioners how to be mentors.

And so I started to fall in love with my instructors. I started to not necessarily pick a class for the class, but I started to pick the class for the character that was teaching it and I didn't realize, like, what the transformation was that was happening in my own heart. I didn't realize then I was learning how to be an instructor and I was identifying the good instruction traits that I liked from the instructors that I liked.

A mentor might be the only person who practices a particular skill. If they pass away, they will take the skill with them. It was important for co-researchers to learn what they could from their mentors while they are alive so that someone can keep that skill going. This creates a culture where knowledge is passed down through storytelling and informal instruction. Mentors demonstrate humility and do not need to be the ultimate authority on a skill. This created a feeling of balance and equality for co-researchers.

David Holladay, So he's a good flintknapper. And a guy gave him a rock and said, can you bust this up for me? I know you're really good at flint knapping. Well, he went over there and after the fourth flake, it was starting to mess up. He handed it to Andrew and said, hey, can you fix this? And Andrew sat there five minutes and set a few things up and made a few flakes and got it back on track.

Teaching was not a calling for all co-researchers, but sharing knowledge and giving back to the community in some way was a very important part of the culture. When co-researchers agreed to teach at ancestral skills gatherings, it felt like an honor and a huge obligation. There was a feeling that they couldn't stop teaching until all of the students were satisfied and this sometimes meant that teachers had to sacrifice their own learning time at the gatherings. The knowledge that teachers are passing down is so important because it could help someone else experience that "primal" connection that co-researchers have experienced. One co-researcher stated, "I hope that I can share enough to inspire and trigger that primal instinct that we all have." The knowledge of ancestral skills needs to be shared, so co-researchers were driven to set up clubs and activities at their homes or in their local communities. For several co-researchers, it is important to learn the spiritual side of skills and pass this along in some way.

The Gathering and Skills Community

Group affiliation was important to co-researchers and at an ancestral skills gathering, they often identified their group as a tribe or a family. This group was more important than simply a group of "likeminded people", they became extended family and fellow travelers who worked together to create a safe space. One participant talked about the day he had to leave his first Rabbitstick,

Even if I just spent every dollar I had in my pocket and I just literally ran out of gas in the parking lot, it would be ok because I would have had a week that I could spend with my tribe, the people I've been looking for all my life, the community I've been looking for all my life.

There was a clear hierarchy of elders, mentors and those who are moving through the ranks and co-researchers were made aware of that hierarchy by listening to those elders speak around the fire, or by listening to others in the group speak about those elders.

Those who are considered to be elders are generally humble, and co-researchers felt that no-one would not realize their status just by speaking to them. Having this informal structure created an environment where everyone felt safe to be themselves. Co-researchers were not worried that they would offend someone with their viewpoints and there was no formal chain of command that they might disrupt by saying the wrong thing to the wrong person. Even those elders who are considered to be highly knowledgeable love to become students and learn the knowledge that others have to share. The behavior modeled by the elders is emulated by teachers and students, creating a safe emotional space for everyone.

Acceptance, and participating in an accepting community, was an important piece of this group affiliation for co-researchers. Some felt like the outside world didn't get them, but the community at a gathering did not judge them. Even those who have radically different beliefs, who wouldn't even associate with each other in their regular lives, can have constructive conversations and great friendships at gatherings, "regardless of our other stripes in the outer world." Co-researchers cited several examples of how someone who might not be able to connect with others in their regular lives, like someone

with RAD or autism, could easily find connection and acceptance at a gathering. While these rules of acceptance were not explicitly stated as rules of the gatherings, all participants seemed to adopt and follow these temporary cultural norms. One co-researcher observed, “When we're there, we don't focus on any of the differences, and any differences that come up, we actually kind of appreciate and enjoy and learn from each other.” Even the kids at gatherings changed the way they played with each other based on these unspoken rules of conduct. One co-researcher observed that stopped playing competitively and started playing cooperatively, “And there is some competition, but it's not a competition that you see where I win and you lose. It's I'm doing better, let me help you also do better, because we're all working together.” This might be because of a deep feeling of connectedness or it might be because they see adults modeling cooperative behavior, but it was not only evident to co-researchers that there was a change in their behavior, but that this change helped kids to feel the same safety felt by the adults. Co-researchers noted that the gatherings they attended only lasted for one week, which is just enough time to experience the good and avoid all of the issues that might arise from long term communal living, “We don't discover what kind of assholes each one of us are, you know, fall apart.” When co-researchers left at the end of the week, they felt the loss of their community for a while and looked forward to the next gathering of friends and family,

Well I was having a hard time saying goodbye to her, to Colleen Kincaid. She said, “Don't be sad because it's 51 weeks from right now, we're going to do this all over again. We only got to make it, you only got to make it fifty one weeks, we'll

be together again.” And I stopped living my life on a calendar in 12 month increments that year, and now I live my life Fifty two weeks at a time.

Co-researchers identified people who had not experienced the connectedness found at gatherings as often seeming lost and afraid. They feel powerless over their lives and can’t find the joy in simplicity. They are tied to money, which affects their ability to enjoy skills for their connection. Work, making money, the financial markets, all of these things become the primary focus, even for those who attend gatherings, in the real world. Everyone who has experienced the feeling of connectedness that they experience at gatherings or in small groups of like-minded people is looking to get more of that experience. Co-researchers felt that there was just something in our DNA that makes us want to gather with others in an outdoor setting. They yearned for that feeling of truly being human, laughing and learning alongside our people. One important aspect of the gathering that co-researchers attended was the presence of music in general and drumming in particular. Drumming was identified as a skill that everyone could learn, a source of community and a way for everyone to speak the same language. Music helped co-researchers to feel a deep community connection on a spiritual level. Music flows from people and is spiritual when it is spontaneous and non-commercial, “Music has a way of communicating outside of language, outside of any genres. You play some kind of music next to a little kid and they start dancing all by themselves.” Kids will dance naturally, but adults have to be reminded that it is ok to dance. Drumming and dancing events like Mask Night at Rabbitstick help adults to remember that they can just let go and dance. However, playing music is a scary and vulnerable experience for people. Mentors often needed to reassure co-researchers and coax them out of their shell, “just

come, drum, go with the beat, enjoy yourself and have fun.” Co-researchers found that people are so afraid of failure or looking bad that it creates a barrier to playing music. Even something as simple as keeping the beat helped them to let go and to feel like an essential part of the music.

Currency takes on a different meaning when money is no longer the central focus of a group of people. Currency can be a warm meal or teaching a new skill. When those things are currency, it was easier for co-researchers to feel grateful for them, since they are not tied to a dollar amount, but they are truly a gift of something that they didn’t have before. It was difficult for co-researchers to find the balance between needing money in the Western world and finding their way back to a group that does not view money as the only currency. As soon as money gets involved, it changes the feel of the situation. When money was involved, co-researchers worried more and weren’t able to be as present. Sometimes making money had to be sacrificed so that co-researchers could live the life they felt they were really meant to live. This might mean living simply in a yurt or it might mean leaving their career to focus on their craft.

Learning skills opened some co-researchers up to a new understanding of spirituality, religion, and the complex relationship between the two. Teachers like Tom Brown and John Olson taught the spiritual side of the skills. One co-researcher recalls,

And I remember Grandmother Margaret. She's one of the [International Council of Thirteen] Indigenous Grandmothers and we were at a talk and somebody asked about our dualistic world, talking about the spirit world and the physical world. And she just. she just kind of, put her foot down, and stomped, and said there is no such thing as a dualistic world, we all live in the spirit world. The spirit all

around us, it's in us, It's around us, It's in the trees, it's in the plants. And just that concept of being, living in a dualistic world creates that division.

Practicing skills opened several co-researchers up to seeing the world as both physical and spiritual, acknowledging the signs that animals might give them or seeing the rain stop when a tribe sings the right song. Organized religion did not give them that same feeling of connection, but co-researchers didn't have to move away from the religion entirely to embrace this new spirituality. Spirituality is personal, looking within, and co-researchers felt they could take the spiritual journey while following their chosen organized religion.

Community and nature connectedness are the forces that drive practitioners to pursue the study of ancestral skills. This connectedness is reinforced by a feeling that is awakened in them as they practice the skills, as well as the safe and supportive community in which they practice the skills. Mentors did not just model the skills and lifelong learning behavior that supported co-researchers pursuit of knowledge, they helped to create the environment where co-researchers could feel safe from judgement, not only related to the skills they were practicing, but related to their lives they were living and their belief systems. This underlying structure, combined with the timeline of co-researchers textural experiences creates the story of a journey from the disconnected world to the connected world.

The Experience of Nature and Community Connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education

From the shared textural and structural accounts of co-researchers, a combined textural-structural description of the phenomenon of community and nature

connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education can be created. This description captures the essence of the experience in general and creates a picture of a journey from the disconnected to the connected world. It is important to describe the disconnected world, as co-researchers felt that their journey away from that world (or at least their time spent away from that world) was so important that they needed to share it with others and bring others to this understanding. This desire was not motivated by religious or political viewpoints, just by a need to share this feeling of connectedness with others.

The Disconnected World

Ancestral skills education brings experiencers on a journey from the disconnected world to the connected world. In order to understand their experience of nature and community connectedness, it is important to understand their worries disconnected world, and for the people that they are living among in their day to day lives. These are people that they care about, people who haven't yet had the experience that will put them on a path to living in the connected world. The disconnected world is driven by financial goals and religious guidelines. Fear is the dominant motivator and demotivator: fear of being poor, fear of not being the best, fear of going hungry, fear of getting hurt, fear of judgement, fear of disappointing family, fear of looking stupid, and fear of the natural world. Financial goals cause people to make many decisions that are not really best for their personal well-being, community or environment. In the disconnected world, people go to school for professions that are the most lucrative, they stay at jobs that are not satisfying and they hoard information so that others can't outshine their talents. As they work to inflate their material wealth and their social status, they conform to the schedules and oversight of their invisible master, the Western culture of excess. Disconnected

people work according to someone else's schedule, send their kids to school each day without regard for their interests, then spend their afternoons driving to dance and soccer without giving anyone the opportunity for free time. Everyone is in constant competition at work, at school and at activities.

There is a question as to whether people show their real selves in the connected world or in the disconnected world. Are people being fake as they go through their daily lives in the disconnected world? Or, are they holding their breath during ancestral skills gatherings and other such connected events, hoping that no one finds out who they really are? It is possible that they are just different versions of themselves, those that are connected are preferred to those that are disconnected. When people spend time in the disconnected world, they do not look inward and assess their personal balance, they focus outwardly on their differences and find ways to categorize people and to separate "us" from "them". In the disconnected world, disabilities like autism, ADHD and RAD block some people's ability to communicate and learn effectively. In the connected world, these disabilities often go unnoticed.

Those who haven't yet found the connected world share some important characteristics. First and foremost, they are afraid of nature and of each other. They don't understand where their food comes from or how to take care of themselves. They live in smog and pollution because they don't realize that there is another way to live. Those who have found the connected world try to help them down the path, by volunteering in their communities or teaching friends how to forage.

Religious beliefs straddle the two worlds, allowing some to maintain their long-held beliefs while incorporating the new spirituality of connectedness. Those who have

not experienced the connected world are quick to judge a connected person's new understanding that the spiritual world and the physical world are the same. The skills aren't simply crafts, they are connections to our ancestors and to a part of ourselves that we once thought lost. As practitioners become more connected, animals and plants become fellow travelers, sharing their knowledge and asking practitioners to return the favor through stewardship. It is difficult for those in the disconnected world to see how more than one belief system can be followed at the same time, or how connected people can see nature as our community. It is easy for those in the disconnected world to create division between groups based on religious beliefs and practices that may not ultimately be that different.

Some choose to transition completely to the connected world, physically moving themselves to a yurt in the woods or a farm with sustainable features. They serve as role models for their disconnected friends and neighbors and hope to convert as many as possible. Others try to keep one foot in both worlds by creating and selling crafts. Practicing ancestral skills on a daily basis helps them to keep their personal feeling of connectedness, but selling their crafts often leaves them feeling like they are bound to the disconnected world against their will. Many simply live their lives 52 weeks at a time, dipping their toes in the connected world at ancestral skills gatherings and bringing more and more of that culture home with them from each gathering they attend.

Life Journey and The Real World

When talking about experiences with Ancestral Skills Education, many begin by talking about childhood. Those who felt a connection to nature in childhood just knew that they were a part of the natural world. These children experienced the unhindered

freedom to play in the woods, make forts and explore their backyards, neighborhoods and local wild areas. Sometimes they would explore with school, camp and scouting organizations. These organizations helped them to feel like time in the outdoors was just a normal part of life. Skills that they learned with these organizations included survival based ancestral skills like making and tending fires, navigation and purifying water. Sometimes they would explore with parents and grandparents. These informal experiences linger in their minds as a positive connection to family and provide a base for their understanding of the “rightness” of nature connection as a spiritual journey. Field trips, fly fishing, hunting, foraging for food, camping and simply taking walks in the woods all contributed to a feeling that time in the outdoors was just normal and that the outdoors were designed for interaction and relationship. Fire and foraging were primary connections, giving experiencers the confidence that they could survive in the woods, while the ability of nature to take a life provided the contrast, whether by lightning storm or by the misuse of medicinal plants. Connectedness meant understanding that man was in no way supposed to conquer nature, but to live as a mindful and awe filled steward of plants and animals.

Those who didn’t experience nature in a deep way as a child had a moment of life changing connection with nature in adulthood. These experiences of nature connection, whether they were deep in the wilderness or in a backyard garden, awakened the same need for connection experienced by others as children. Once they experienced it, they would spend their lives either trying to recapture this feeling or feeling a sense of loss as they resigned themselves to living in the disconnected world. For many, a more powerful connection was created by the act of making a fire or setting up a self-sustaining camp.

Those who worked in wilderness therapy felt that they were given a gift that often their clients weren't quite ready to understand, through learning ancestral skills in an outdoor setting and seeing the effect that simplifying life had on the children in their care.

Wilderness therapy changed the lives of these adults, prompting a few to even pursue careers in psychology. Others tried to mix their connection to craft with the marketplace world, selling their crafts at bow shoots, rendezvous, barter faires and art shows. The experience at these events did not create the same connectedness because they were based on commerce, not sharing.

There is a need to pass this feeling on to the next generation, but a fear that this generation is not able to feel that instant connection. As kids grow into teenagers, they may need to be given the freedom to choose whether to interact with nature. They may also need an emotional safety net to ease their way in. Practitioners fear that this generation is just too detached, that a negative experience will feed the fear that teens have developed and will destroy the opportunity for connection. Connectedness is a mutual, respectful relationship that just can't be recreated for teenagers by throwing them into the woods. However, practitioners have witnessed the amazing transformation in children who come from a highly scheduled world into the slow world of ancestral skills gatherings. Those who may have a diagnosis like ADHD, RAD or Autism in a more structured world, seem to be able to find connection and acceptance once cultural constraints have been removed. These kids are able to experience connectedness by making a bow drill fire, wood firing pottery, or flintknapping an arrowhead.

Books are a window into the life of connectedness, showing the reader that they are not the only person who longs for a connected life. The books that resonated with

practitioners created an emotional and spiritual connection with ancestral skills, as the authors or characters went into the woods and interacted with nature. Tom Brown and Larry Dean Olsen did more than just write a recipe book for ancestral skills, they included the spiritual understanding of nature that was experienced by people who had a deep connection with nature. Books like *My Side of the Mountain* and Andrew Henry's *Meadow* did not define the connection in the same way, but showed just how close every kid could be to running away and returning to a true coexistence with the natural world. None of these books were about conquering nature, they were about finding balance and recognizing our place within nature and ultimately our responsibility to our natural community. Even the Bowyer's Bible created community by sharing the history of the craft of bow making, providing not only instruction, but a feeling of connection to something larger.

As children turn into adults, their need for nature connection grows into a need for a like-minded community. The disconnected world begins to convince them that nature and people are separate, as are the physical and spiritual world. Those practitioners who did not find their community quickly, experienced a time of sadness as they searched for a like-minded mentor. This need for community is counterbalanced by the disconnected drive down the path of materialism. It's hard to separate oneself from the world where enough is never enough and obtaining more stuff is supposed to be the primary focus of your journey. Television, marketing, social and religious groups kept some co-researchers off the path of connectedness for decades. When these practitioners returned to ancestral skills, they were effortlessly transformed back to that feeling of connectedness. When they found like-minded people to practice skills with, whether it

was in a class, at their homes, or at a gathering, they felt the instant connection, like it was just a part of their DNA.

This need to experience connection sparks a need to live by example, to show others in their world how much happiness they can find through simple living. A major move out of the city, to a yurt or farm, or even to a house with spaces designated for connection and reflection, are outward efforts to show friends and family a different possibility for living. This “passive activism” is a piece of that deep feeling of community connectedness. Their communities may not completely understand practitioners (and may judge them for some of their beliefs and practices), but their knowledge is appreciated and effective at changing hearts and minds.

Content over connection, individualism over community, pursuit of achievement over flow of happiness, all of these themes contrast the life that co-researchers feel they are expected to live with the life of nature and community connectedness that they seek out. Co-researchers may be in different stages of experiencing this life. Some are living simply in yurts, others are balancing their day job with a hobby of bow making, still others are trying to merge their professional lives with their need for connection through spiritual healing or selling their crafts. Practitioners are moving away from feelings of fear, but they are watching the world around them become increasingly fearful of nature. This fear is paralleled by a lack of ability to care for oneself, by not knowing where one's food comes from and by not understanding the plants and animals in their local area. A feeling of connectedness with the natural community can be classified as a “spiritual awakening” that many disconnected people have been searching for. Some practitioners initiated this connectedness simply by walking through the gate of an ancestral skills

gathering. This experience of seeing a large group of people living happily and simply created an ideal impression of community connectedness and a safe space to explore their nature connection.

Teaching and Learning Ancestral Skills

Ancestral skills can be divided into three major categories: survival, functional and spiritual. Skills that are necessary for survival include starting a fire, foraging, making a shelter, collecting water and being aware of your surroundings. Cordage, points, traps and hunting technology are also a part of these core skills. Friction fires can be an exciting initiation skill, providing the experiencer with an instant feeling of connection to nature and to their ancestors. Practicing these survival skills felt to some practitioners like an awakening of a piece of them that had been asleep for thousands of years. The bow drill was not something that had been experienced at summer camp or through scouting programs. Learning to make fire from friction, or developing a deeper connection with fire, created an immediate connection for practitioners. Foraging, cordage and flint knapping created similar connections to both nature and community. Foraging helped practitioners to feel confident in the woods and fostered a direct relationship between practitioners and the plants around them. The act of making a useful piece of twine out of a stick is its own sort of magic. Making cordage is a skill that does not require much concentration or effort, so it promotes a community connectedness as a group shares the experience of making, talking, laughing and sometimes singing together. Flintknapping is a similar community building experience, though the art of flintknapping is so complex that new learning is possible for even the most seasoned knapper. The knapping pit at an ancestral skills gathering is a place for conversation, for elders to pass

down knowledge and for everyone to feel like they still have something to learn. The knapping pit is a hub for sharing knowledge in a way that helps all practitioners to grow. Lessons at the knapping pit are often informal and new members wander in and out of the group. For those who feel compelled to stay for long periods of time, the experience demonstrates the selfless environment of teaching and learning, where teachers are sometimes learners when a person with new knowledge comes along.

Functional skills, like pottery, forging and felting also provided a feeling of connectedness to ancestors. Functional skills are the “making” skills that helped us to create items, most of which can now be purchased easily in a store. Making these items helped practitioners feel closer to their own culture and to connect with other cultures. There was not a sense of taking from another culture, just learning the skills of that group and trying to better understand a community through their crafts. The act of creating out of natural materials requires a better understanding of the natural world, helping practitioners to view these materials as part of their community. Those who have found connection with these materials can tell their stories of their lives by examining their shape, texture and growth patterns. For some practitioners, the act of making put them in touch with their creator, as they were mimicking the act of creating. Crafts that are made, not purchased, hold a special meaning for the maker. As demonstrated by a child who treasured her corn husk doll above all of her store bought toys, the act of making creates a spiritual bond between the maker and the item.

Skills like music, plant spirit medicine, animal medicine, and sound baths connect practitioners to nature and community on a spiritual level. Practicing these skills does not violate the ideas of organized religion, though some practitioners have moved from a

monotheistic view of the world to a more pantheistic view or simply a spiritual understanding of all creatures in nature. Often, practitioners found a deeper connection to the spiritual world through dancing, singing or creating music. Drumming, dancing and singing are acts that feel accessible to the inexperienced and can be powerful rites of passage, or inductions to the world of connectedness. However, musical experiences required a level of vulnerability that created an initial barrier for practitioners. Some practitioners first needed to see skills demonstrated, explained and attached to their personal experience before they felt safe enough to be vulnerable. Drumming was often a next step, as anyone can drum once they move past their initial fear of embarrassment. Once a practitioner began drumming and allowed themselves to feel vulnerable, the experience was often transformational. Drumming has created powerful relationships between practitioners as they experienced the music together. Dancing and experiences like sound baths have been healing in a similar way, but have not created the same powerful relationships between practitioners. Mask night at Rabbitstick, an event where people drum and dance late into the night, is a night that many practitioners wait for all year. This experience of drumming and dancing together helps the entire community to feel a powerful connection.

Survival, functional and spiritual skills are accessible to people of all abilities and do not violate the disconnected culture's definition of acceptable practices, allowing practitioners to live in both the connected world and the disconnected world. Some just sum these skills up as "living simply", having the ability to take care of oneself and one's community either in nature or in the event of a life altering political or economic disaster. A deeper connection can be obtained if these skills are practiced with an

acknowledgement to their spiritual value. For example, a veteran flintknapper who simply makes stone knives in their garage without acknowledging the connection to their ancestors may not have the full transformational experience that a novice flintknapper will have sitting in the knapping pit and learning from mentors and elders and really experiencing that connection. While some found a skill that was “their skill”, all practitioners had a hunger to learn more and practice as many skills as possible. Practicing ancestral skills brought practitioners into a state of flow, similar to meditation, that allowed them to feel connection on a deeper level. This feeling of connectedness helped practitioners to develop a worldview where humans are only one part of a greater whole. This feeling of connectedness also fosters humility and respect among practitioners, who set ego aside to share their skills as mentors, and eventually share their wisdom as elders.

Mentors can come in a number of forms. For many experiencers, books facilitated an important transition from simply enjoying nature to practicing and studying ancestral skills. This was especially true when a practitioner lived in a situation where ancestral skills mentors were not a readily available part of their community. *Outdoor Survival Skills* by Larry Dean Olsen and *The Tracker* by Tom Brown were books that shared both the skills and the spiritual connection to the skills. Brown and Olsen became invisible, internal mentors to practitioners who read their books, creating an emotional and spiritual connection for the practitioners. Books like the *Bowyers Bible* taught the hard skills and provided a foundation for experiencers to hone their craft, while still creating a feeling of community through a shared history. The books did not feel like enough, so reading these books often launched a physical search for more, a community of like-minded people

where practitioners could discuss and improve their skills. When books weren't enough, practitioners sought out a mentor. Mentors provided the basic knowledge and materials for practicing skills. Since many skills require very specific natural materials, even procuring these materials was a barrier for practitioners without help from a mentor. In many cases, mentors helped practitioners to learn the basics of their primary skill, and also shared the qualities that practitioners eventually recognized as important teaching qualities. Mentors created a personal connection with their mentees. Practitioners were careful to acknowledge those they had learned from, continuing a culture of reverence for the sources of their connection. For some practitioners, the skills that they learned were not as important as the mentor themselves, and they found that they were drawn to focus on a specific skill because of the mentor. Mentors were credited with sharing the magic, sharing the connection, not simply sharing directions on how to make an item.

Mentors model very specific teaching qualities. First, they share unconditionally as long as they feel that the mentee plans to do the same. Financial transactions are not important to them. However, for some, this is how they pay for food and shelter, so financial transactions, while devalued, are still necessary. Passing down knowledge to others who will continue to pass down knowledge is a primary goal. Practitioners worry about losing the knowledge that in some cases has only been recreated and rediscovered in the current generation. There is a very real risk of losing this information upon the death of an elder who has not found someone to take on their role. Mentors also model a lack of judgement, a love of the skills for their own sake. There is no competition to be the best, rather a goal of fostering connection. Finally, mentors teach humility by learning new skills themselves. Someone who is an expert in one area may try a new skill so that

they can get better at that. This models the importance of the connection over the importance of competition. Watching a mentor learn a new skill also helps to create a feeling of balance, of emotional safety, and helps practitioners to shed the sense of competition and inadequacy that they brought from their disconnected culture.

Becoming a teacher in some way is just a natural progression from being a student. Teaching a class can create stress beyond being a mentor, though, because there is an obligation to many people that the practitioner don't really know very well.

Practitioners want to make sure that they all have a good experience, so it can create a feeling of anxiety if practitioners believe that they are not giving someone the best experience. Practitioners who felt pushed too far in that direction quickly found that they needed to reinvent their teaching style or topics so that they could have a more enjoyable experience. One never knows when the skill that is being taught will become the skill that a student grabs onto and dedicates their life to, so teaching is both a huge honor and a huge responsibility. Teachers and students all get to be part of the community building process, though teachers are guides of the content and conversation. Teachers don't just teach the skills, they are "passive activists", promoting a simple lifestyle and a spiritual connection through teaching the skills. The skills all come with unspoken community traditions and attached spiritual understandings that are important to transmit to newcomers in some way. Becoming a teacher or mentor might make you feel like a true part of the community, as you've become a contributor instead of a seeker of knowledge. There is no point where being a teacher precludes you from joining another class and learning a different skill. In fact, teachers try to find time to take classes from others so that they can expand their knowledge and skill set.

The Gatherings: A Model of Connectedness

Gatherings are a place where skills are shared openly, passed down from elders and mentors to students. While all gatherings have their own unique traditions, they have evolved from a core set of values and goals: sharing ideas and accepting the ideas of others, showing respect for elders and teachers, allowing kids to play and grow in a safe space, and giving back to the community. In addition to these core values, there are a number of basic principles that make the gatherings unique spaces for idea exchange and a successful experiment in communal living. For practitioners, the “skills are secondary” to the experience of community connectedness. Simply put, a practitioner might initially attend a gathering to learn and practice skills, but they return year after year due to a deep sense of community connectedness. At these gatherings, all beliefs are accepted, welcomed, and encouraged. Judgement is frowned upon, whether it is judgement of self or judgement of others. Money is no longer the primary focus, goods are valued by meaning more than by the marketplace. Music is spontaneous and spiritual. Practitioners were brought to gatherings by fellow travelers, brothers, children, friends and mentors. All of these people have a place in their story, an eternal connectedness. These are the people who changed lives simply by sharing their experiences.

When a newcomer enters a gathering, it just feels like a safe space. They instantly understand that something special is happening and that they are about to experience a radically different lifestyle, even if just for a week. One practitioner described his first day at a gathering:

I had no idea what I was walking into, so I got through the gate and I saw the wall tents everywhere and I was just blown away by what was going on and I saw

people living in a simple way. And I saw community and I saw people with smiles on their faces. And I thought to myself, like, I've been looking for this place for so long, like the day I was walking into it. I've been looking for this place. I didn't know it was there.

The gatherings are a place where everyone comes to teach and learn in an emotionally safe environment. Learning is a process of connecting, not a competitive process of mastering a skill or becoming the best at something. The children at gatherings even pick this up in their play. When one child is better at a skill, they will share their knowledge with other children to help them get better.

Every skill has different techniques, so even the teachers are able to learn from each other. The novice learner sits right beside the person who has been learning for years, and takes in as much knowledge as they can, given their prior level of understanding. Skills are communicated through informal mentoring, experiential learning and storytelling. It is an honor to be a teacher, and those who have the opportunity to teach share their gratitude for the opportunity. The hierarchy of elders, mentors and students is felt informally, but never enforced or defined. Elders teach through storytelling, modeling and sharing their skills, but also their philosophies. They are willing to learn from others and model the values of the gathering for others to pick up on. Giving back is expected, but there is an extreme patience with those who are not ready to give back just yet. If they don't understand yet, they will come to understand over the years. There is confidence that the expected behavior of the gatherings can be learned, even at an event as large as Rabbitstick, as there are enough mentors modeling for newer community members.

The gatherings gave practitioners an opportunity to see spirituality outside of their dominant religion. Some had no problem incorporating beliefs like animal medicine into their Christian beliefs. Others found that their new understanding of the spiritual world was too difficult to reconcile with the beliefs of their childhood. Experiences at gatherings were an opportunity to glimpse a different worldview without having to completely embrace it. Ideas were shared in a way where the experiencer could choose to learn more or could choose to maintain their current belief system. Animal medicine and plant spirit medicine were taught as part of classes, not outside of the skills, but as an idea that couldn't necessarily be separated from the physical aspect of the skills. Traditions from all over the world could be incorporated and compared as practitioners looked inward for deeper spiritual and cultural connections. For example, the circles of the mandala, the medicine wheel and the sunflower all have meaning that did not fly in the face of conventional Christian beliefs, but added a layer of spirituality for one practitioner. Practitioners experienced healing at the gatherings. For some this healing altered the course of their lives and for others it helped them to at least feel like they had a place in the world.

Music is an important element to the gatherings that creates spiritual and community connections. Playing music and dancing required practitioners to be vulnerable, and making the choice to play music often first involved a time of watching and getting up the nerve to participate. Mentors often encouraged and scaffolded them as they stepped into that experience. Mask night, a drumming and dancing event at Rabbitstick gave experiencers an opportunity to watch others and see how they are affected by the music, then participate as the night progressed. Smaller experiences at

campsites or at drum circles outside of the gatherings allowed a more personal take on the musical experience, creating opportunities for spontaneity and invention. Spiritual music, music that is connective on a deeper level, wasn't dictated by the disconnected culture, but was brought out of participants as they connected with each other.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the experiences of community and nature connectedness through Ancestral Skills Education as detailed by ten practitioners. These practitioners were both students and teachers that had deep and meaningful experiences in the practice of ancestral skills over the course of their lifetime. Practitioners identified three different types of engagement, based on the connection invoked by a skill. The type of engagement changed if the practitioner was engaged in a survival, functional or spiritual skill, though there were core qualities found in all three. The emotionally safe space found at an ancestral skills gathering gave practitioners the opportunity to explore new experiences and the meaning in those experiences without fear of judgement from others. This environment was cultivated by mentors and elders as the rules of the community were established through informal means. The practice of ancestral skills led practitioners to want to become mentors and share their feeling of connectedness with people who were still stuck in the disconnected world.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study described the phenomenon of community and nature connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education. Ten co-researchers, seven men and three women, volunteered to share the stories of their experiences with Ancestral Skills Education and their feelings of connectedness. These

co-researchers were recruited through personal recommendations by Patrick Farneman, posting a request in the Between the Rivers Skills Gathering Facebook group and asking for volunteers at the Fire to Fire skills gathering. All co-researchers but two were interviewed remotely, using Google Meet.

In chapter one, I defined ancestral skills as those skills that were once practiced in some form by the ancestors of all people. I presented the historical context for ancestral skills education, beginning with the industrial revolution, urbanization and the development of the American compulsory schooling system. The time period of the mid to late 1800's set us on a course of disconnect between people and the natural world, one that continues today. I shared the need for this research, our increasing disconnect and the issues that we face because of it. Next, I stated the purpose of this research, to describe the way that Ancestral Skills Education (ASE) is helping people to rekindle that connection, using ways of teaching and learning that humans have used for far longer than the practice of Western schooling. ASE challenges the Anthropocentric narrative and helps participants to see themselves as part of a larger natural community. I shared my personal story, which planted the seed for my own research, and I provided a brief overview of my research questions and my study.

I began chapter two with a discussion of the literature related to community and nature connectedness. Connectedness, or a feeling of "belonging", was such an intuitive need that it was listed by Maslow before any empirical evidence supported his claim (Baumeister et al, 1995). Next, I outlined the history of compulsory education and its role in promoting a national identity, common language and Protestant moral values. Regional identity and the skills passed down through generations of non-dominant cultures were

discouraged by this system and in the case of Native American cultures, forcibly prohibited. I discuss the methodologies, history and current studies on ASE. I complete this chapter with the Indigenous and non-Indigenous studies that created the foundation for this study, as well as a discussion of cultural appropriation.

Chapters three and four describe the current study and present the shared experiences of community and nature connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education. In this process, ten co-researchers were interviewed and each interview was transcribed. Next, each interview was analyzed using the transcendental phenomenological process outlined by Moustakas (1994). A textural and structural description was created for each co-researcher. These descriptions and the thematic portrayals of the thirteen themes identified by co-researchers were used to develop a textural, structural and textural-structural description of the experience of community and nature connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education. In this chapter, I will summarize my findings, present answers to my research questions, discuss the social and professional implications, the need for further research and limitations on this study.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this transcendental-phenomenological study was to answer one central question: what is the shared experience of nature and community connectedness for participants in Ancestral Skills Education. To get a clear picture of this phenomenon, I asked three sub-questions. The first sub-question was designed to learn more about the skills themselves and how different skills may have contributed to this feeling: what are the shared characteristics of ancestral skills experiences that helped them to feel this connectedness? The second sub-question focused on the bigger picture, the life paths

taken by practitioners as they deepened their connectedness: are there shared paths to a feeling of connectedness? And finally, the third sub-question focused on the change they had seen in their relationships due to their connectedness: how has connectedness changed their relationship with the environment and community? This summary will answer each of these questions in a concise way.

What is the shared experience of nature and community connectedness for participants in Ancestral Skills Education?

Participants in ancestral skills education feel like they are living in the connected world, where nature is not under human control and the spiritual experience is of equal importance to the physical experience. This feeling may have started in childhood, might have been nurtured by books, but the passion to learn ancestral skills was often ignited by a mentor and an initiation skill like the bow drill, cordage or foraging. As they grow more connected, they are less and less influenced by materialistic forces that drive the disconnected world. Making their own clothing, furniture and essential items helps them to further develop their appreciation for the life they have been given. In the connected world, gifts are given, stories are told and elders are honored. Music allows them to deepen their connection with others and celebrate their connectedness to community. Students become teachers and mentors as part of the journey. They worry about their disconnected friends and want to help them along the path of connectedness.

Sub-question 1: What are the shared characteristics of ancestral skills experiences that helped them to feel this connectedness?

When ancestral skills are approached in a spiritual way, or when they create a feeling of flow or deep meditation inside of the practitioner, they lead to a greater feeling

of connectedness. Some skills are difficult to approach because they cause the participant to feel vulnerable, like singing, dancing and drumming. Other skills, like cordage or flint knapping, are easy to approach. If mentors share these skills in a spiritual way, it may foster a greater feeling of connectedness. The bow drill is an initiation skill that practitioners take pride in completing for the first time. In some circumstances, observing a demonstration of a skill can create a feeling of connectedness for a non-participant.

Sub-question 2: Are there shared paths to a feeling of connectedness?

The path to a feeling of connectedness starts in childhood or as a teenager by experiencing the outdoors. Children who have grown up with exposure to nature just feel the connectedness, they are wired to experience it. If a child has not been exposed to the outdoors, they may need a gentle introduction because they may have developed a fear of the outdoors. Experiences that foster deeper connection are sought out by those who realize that they are on the path to connectedness. Often, books are an intermediate step while practitioners seek out mentors. Four co-researchers had experiences working as guides in wilderness therapy and pointed to these experiences as a path to their feelings of community and nature connectedness.

Sub-question 3: How has connectedness changed their relationship with the environment and community?

In the connected world, there is little, if any, separation between the environment and community. A journey to a truly connected life may involve a transition to a simpler, more spiritual lifestyle. For several co-researchers, this meant a physical move to a different dwelling in a more natural setting. Those who are connected become mentors and guides for those who need help along the way. Bringing community members to this

feeling of connectedness is important to practitioners who hold seminars, teach classes and participate in groups with the goal of helping the disconnected find their way to the path.

The answers to these four questions were defined through the textural, structural and structural-textural descriptions of the phenomenon of community and nature connectedness in ASE. These descriptions were created using the invariant horizons of the experiences that were identified by the co-researchers and the imaginative variation determined by the researcher. Using the transcendental-phenomenological approach outlined by Moustakas (1994), I will provide an in-depth look how these findings add to the existing body of literature.

Distinguishing Findings from Prior Research

In the literature review, I briefly visited the claims of cultural appropriation in Ancestral Skill Education. This is a difficult topic to address as there is a need to both acknowledge mistakes and forge a path forward. The co-researchers in this study identified their journey from the disconnected world to the connected world. If we frame the connected world as Indigenous and the disconnected world as Western, then it follows that any attempt to access the connected world could be construed as cultural appropriation. If we take a different approach and say that connectedness is the domain of premodern or pre industrial societies, we risk romanticizing “primitive” peoples. As a non-Indigenous educator, how do I present a discussion of Ancestral Skills Education that does not feel like cultural appropriation? I chose to address this issue in the literature review by framing our disconnected world as a direct result of Western industrialization and colonization. As a woman from the dominant culture documenting the experiences of

ten people who are also from the dominant culture as they practice skills that in recent history have been the domain of Indigenous peoples, I acknowledge these practices are most likely going to feel like appropriation, regardless of their connection to our deep past. I hope to open up further conversation on this issue, particularly on how to proceed if the connectedness found in Indigenous practices may provide the course correction that all people, and especially Western people, need to experience.

The path to connection requires us to look to those who have maintained their connectedness throughout the process of industrialization and to embrace ways of thinking that have been suppressed by the narrative of the dominant Western culture. Indigenous educators and researchers have approached this issue from an Indigenous point of view and have left the door open for others to walk through. With this in mind, I will first frame the results of this study first by the existing Indigenous research on the topic, then support this framework with my results and the results of non-Indigenous researchers. Cajete's (1994) book *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* called for educators to look to Indigenous education as a source of wisdom for education reform:

I wish to draw attention to a way of looking at and understanding a primal process of education grounded in the basics of human nature. It is a way of education that is pregnant with potential, not only for the transformation of what is misnamed "Indian Education," but also for its profound applications towards transforming modern education. We must develop the openness and courage to take a creative leap to find in our lives a transformative vision for the sake of ourselves and our children. pp.23-24

...

American education must rededicate its efforts to assist Americans in their understanding and appreciation of spirituality as it relates to the Earth and the place in which they live. It must engender a commitment to service rather than competition, promote respect for individual, cultural and biological diversity, and engage students in learning processes that facilitate the development of their human potential through creative transformation. p.27

Cajete (1994) lists the primary methods of Tribal education, the “expressions of the ancestral Tribal roots of all the families of man” (p.33), as experiential learning, storytelling, ritual/ceremony, dreaming, tutoring/apprenticeship, and artistic creation. Historically, the context for most educational experiences was daily life, learning directly within the community (Cajete, 1994). The co-researchers in this study did not set out to recreate Tribal education. However, their experiences of the disconnected and connected world were filled with examples of teaching and learning that mirrored Cajete’s description of Indigenous education. Co-researchers felt “emotionally safe” at ancestral skills gatherings, where they were able to learn experientially and were instructed based on their own level of understanding and interest. They sought knowledge through mentors, first turning to books but ultimately finding another person who could help guide their journey. Co-researchers came to the ancestral skills community with a desire to make, to create, and to connect with likeminded people. For many, drumming and dance became a way to connect with others on a more spiritual level.

Barajas-López and Bang studied the making process from an Indigenous perspective. The purpose of their study was to expand the boundaries of the current

Maker movement so that it included the Indigenous worldview. Barajas-López and Bang assert that the Maker movement is driven by a Western mindset, with a Western understanding of material consumption and ultimately a capitalist motive (Barajas-López & Bang, 2018). In this study, Barajas-López and Bang established four principles of Indigenous making and sharing. According to Barajas-López and Bang, Indigenous making and sharing:

1. Enacts and communicates stories in a multiplicity of forms in and across temporalities. Knowing, being, and doing are simultaneously unfolding and are essential/defining elements in the practice of material storytelling;
2. Reflects the patterns and processes that cultivate life and draw on deeply interrelated socioecological phenomena requiring interdisciplinary forms of sense-making.
3. Enacts relationships with animate materials that have life courses toward the fulfillment of communal responsibilities.
4. Enables continual renewal of family and community to assert contemporary presences and living Indigenous nature-culture relations. (Barajas-López & Bang, 2018, p.17)

While the current study was not about the process of making, but rather about the feelings of connectedness experienced by the makers, it can still be compared and contrasted with Barajas-López and Bang's study in a limited way. Co-researchers in this study identified a feeling of connectedness to materials and crafts that were being made, both by acknowledging the origin of materials and ideas, and by sharing the ways in which practicing these crafts transformed their worldview. One co-researcher reminded students

that the items they were working with once had life and still had a spirit. Another made a deep connection when she experiences the similarities in the process of making cordage on two continents. A third co-researcher felt that the maker was imitating the “creator”, implying that the act of making was producing an object with a life and story of its own. Craft, for all co-researchers, was a way in which they could shape and express their own stories. A few co-researchers spoke about their experiences with the natural world from a non-dominant perspective. Receiving signs from animals supported major decisions, knowing the plants in a forest was equated to knowing the people at a party, and a song could convince the rain to stop. In some way, each co-researcher expressed a connection to their ancestors through “making”, either through craft or music. Finally, each co-researcher was drawn to share their knowledge in some way. The sharing of knowledge was not simply for the sake of understanding the specific skills, but for the sake of sharing the feeling of connectedness with those in the disconnected world. Co-researchers also saw sharing within the community as strengthening the knowledge that was held by the entire group. When an elder passed away, if their knowledge had not been shared, that knowledge would be lost. So, learning crafts and skills became an important piece for some co-researchers in order to make sure that the knowledge was passed on, and the story could continue to be shared.

Elizabeth MacEachren is not an Indigenous educator, but her work was based in decades of learning from and living with the Anishinaabe people. MacEachren introduces her personal journey of craft making and ancestral skills with the statement, “My experiences of craft making have led me to an intense, deeply meaningful sense of belonging to the natural world” (MacEachren, 2001, p.1). Her personal journey from the

disconnected world to the connected world follows some of the milestones described in this study. As a child, she felt most at home building forts in the woods and playing in wild spaces. She went to summer camp and learned a few skills that helped feed her feeling of connectedness to the natural world and fueled her desire to know more. She turned to books when she couldn't find a mentor and felt a deep feeling of loss as she tried to navigate the disconnected world knowing that connectedness was out there, somewhere, waiting for her. MacEachren wrote,

Overall, I learned to be complacent amidst hypocrisy. I became quiet and seldom shared my imaginative world as I was raised in a house full of hand-made antiques valued more for their market value than for any story they might tell of their origin or use. My historic craft texts emphasized worldviews different from the consumer-based world I inhabited where someone owned every tree in the neighbourhood. I nurtured my nature-craft interest increasingly through reading and imagining life amidst the crafts illustrated in my books. Constantly I tried new crafts, participated in family camping vacations, and retreated into my imaginative world, but I never mastered the skills I desired and associated with nature lore. (MacEachren, 2001, p.14)

Her journey as a teacher ran parallel to her journey into ancestral skills and craft.

MacEachren created guidelines for craftmaking curriculum in a Western setting. While her story demonstrated that her experience was similar to the experiences of the ancestral skills practitioners in this study, the focus of her research was how craft could be taught in a way that encouraged nature connection. MacEachren intuitively knew that connectedness was the foundation for a truly environmentally minded being, one who

didn't feel like they were more important than the other beings in the world around them. As she found this connectedness in her time with the Anishinaabe people, she also experienced their deep cultural connection to place.

MacEachren's craftmaking pedagogical map divides the craft making process into 8 guideposts: origin, seeking, harvesting, resonance of movement, making (design/form and tactile/sensory ability), utility/use, acknowledgement and honoring, and returning back (MacEachren, 2001, p.149). While MacEachren's map is intended to help those who wish to develop craft based curriculum, it is interesting to compare her work with the experience of the co-researchers in this study as they sought connection in their personal journeys. There are many similarities, regardless of how each craft maker found their craft. The current study supports the findings of MacEachren and suggests that her pedagogical map could be used not only in the classroom, but as a roadmap for sustained connectedness among students of all ages. In this discussion, I will visit each of MacEachren's guideposts and compare this with the experiences of co-researchers. Similar to the Barajas-López and Bang comparison, MacEachren's guideposts are designed for a singular making process, not to describe connectedness. The intent of the following comparison is to show that these guideposts can be supported by multiple co-researchers' experiences in the connected world.

Origin

MacEachren defines this guidepost in the following way:

This guidepost requires attention to what it is that informs whether to proceed with making something or not. It encourages listening to the inner voice, or intrinsic quality within that guides the decision whether or not to proceed to make

or even to acquire a craft item. Ultimately it requires distinction between basic needs and wants, and consideration of the impact that the creation of an item has on an individual, a community and the more-than-human world. (MacEachren, 2001, p.153)

The co-researchers in this study had the following experience:

The aim of “Living Simply” was explicitly stated by several co-researchers and implied by others. One co-researcher found a mentor who demonstrated this lifestyle by living in a yurt, with handmade tools and clothing. Another co-researcher walked through the gates of Rabbitstick and saw people living simply, creating a feeling inside of him that he had finally found his people. Co-researchers felt a shift from the need to acquire more stuff to a need to acquire more skill so that they could live in harmony with the land.

Seeking

MacEachren defines this guidepost in the following way:

This guidepost addresses the experience of traveling on the land, seeking material suitable for making crafts. These experiences encourage attunement to the smaller details and finer nuances that people can be aware of when traveling upon the land. It calls upon participants to search continually to learn about the local environment in order to better understand their relationship with the land, or the source of craftmaking materials and the role that removing specific material from the ecosystem may play within the larger ecological relationships of the region. (MacEachren, 2001, p. 154)

The co-researchers in this study had the following experience:

Co-researchers had experiences that ranged from “wilderness” to “backyard”, but with similar seeking qualities to MacEachren’s guidepost. One co-researcher explored his relationship to the sunflowers that he planted in his backyard. Another moved to a farm, where they were able to make use of nettles, clay and other natural materials. Still others talked about the importance of knowing the plants in their local areas. Knowing the plants did not just mean knowing about their “useful” qualities, it meant seeing them as friends and knowing their spirits. A co-researcher who runs a stack knife class at Rabbitstick and Fire to Fire described the materials used to make the knife handles as materials that would otherwise be considered to be junk.

Harvesting

MacEachren defines this guidepost in the following way:

This guidepost explores the method chosen and the acknowledgment provided during the actual moment of taking another life form in order to obtain material to make a craft. It requires students to consider consciously their personal role and how directly experiencing taking the life of another being can influence their understanding of the World. (MacEachren, 2001, p. 156)

The co-researchers in this study had the following experience:

One co-researcher donates one of her sheep to an animal processing class at Rabbitstick. She loves and cares for her animals, and makes this sacrifice to help the community. The animal processing class is conducted with reverence for the sheep, sharing the experience of taking a life with other practitioners. Another tells stories about the deer that once wore the hide that is being tanned in a brain tanning class. In each of her classes, she tries to remind students that the materials they are using had lives and stories to tell. Two co-

researchers talk about how they are able to walk along the trail, foraging as they go, with no need to pack extra food.

Resonance of Motion

MacEachren defines this guidepost in the following way:

This guidepost concerns the sense of awareness of the physical rhythms and the perceptions that result from the repetitive movements involved in making something. It requires consideration of the importance the physical presence and experience of resonance in craftmaking play in human evolutionary and cognitive development. (MacEachren, 2001, p. 157)

The co-researchers in this study had the following experience:

Meditation and a state of flow were common themes among co-researchers. One co-researcher claimed that he couldn't go a "day without chipping" because the act of flintknapping was the thing that put him most at ease with the world. Others did not feel like the skill itself mattered, but the state of meditation and contemplation that practicing the skills put them in. Spiritual skills like drumming, singing and dancing presented the most obvious forms of resonance of motion, but these skills required a degree of vulnerability that made them less accessible at first. One co-researcher could feel the similarities in the motions of making cordage across two continents with two separate groups, experiencing an instant feeling of connectedness through that repetition.

Making

MacEachren defines this guidepost in the following way:

This guidepost deals with exploring the potential and learning the necessary, tactile and body-dependent forms of communication a specific material or

craftmaking experience requires. The guidepost encourages participants to explore their sensory capabilities and the non-verbal understanding that they can acquire through their bodily awareness. (MacEachren, 2001, p. 157)

The co-researchers in this study had the following experience:

Through making, one co-researcher pointed out, we are mimicking our maker. Therefore, we are becoming a maker ourselves and gaining a greater understanding of our creator.

Co-researchers had this experience with survival, functional and spiritual ancestral skills in unique ways, but felt similar spiritual themes of connectedness to the making process.

One co-researcher discussed the challenge of making with natural materials. You really have to know the material, you have to be able to seek out its story and understand how best to work with it. Another considered going on a mission to bring God to the Nharo Bushman, before she watched them sign away the rain (or sing until the sun came out) and realized that they knew God better than anyone she had ever met. While co-researchers have found skills that they identify as “their skill”, all are hungry for knowledge of the other skills and enjoy the process of learning these skills. They watch western judgement creep in for some of their students and try to remind them that your first project is about the learning and the enjoyment is in the process of making.

Utility/Use

MacEachren defines this guidepost in the following way:

This guidepost deals with the factors involved in balancing beauty and function in an item. It asks why utility and aesthetics are not always combined when creating an item, especially in a world where the limitations of material extraction are increasingly being recognized. (MacEachren, 2001, p. 158)

The co-researchers in this study had the following experience:

For practitioners, a made item can hold value in several ways. First, it can become a gift. Many practitioners who were skilled at their craft made items regularly, far more than they could personally use. At ancestral skills gatherings, practitioners enjoyed giving their items to friends. They would often receive gifts as well, though not in a direct exchange. They might also sell their items at a blanket fair or at an art show, supporting their love of craft by paying their bills. Some items, like instruments and drums, were made and then used to create a spiritual connection for their makers. A drum was used to participate in the drum circle at a drumming and dancing event called “Mask Night”, creating an even more powerful connective experience for one co-researcher. A made item can also simply serve as a reminder of what is possible, how we can transform our thinking from the idea that utility correlates with perfect symmetry and form. Some co-researchers remind their students that the first item they make is just the beginning of their journey. It does not need to be perfect, it just needs to be.

Acknowledgement and Honoring

MacEachren defines this guidepost in the following way:

This guidepost concerns the cultural ways humans express their dependency upon both their own ability to make items required for their survival and the numerous relationships they engage in while acquiring craft material. Acknowledgment and celebration can take a wide range of forms, ranging from quiet individual thoughts and actions to large community-based events. (MacEachren, 2001, p. 159)

The co-researchers in this study had the following experience:

Co-researchers made a point to trace the lineage of a skill and a philosophy as they knew it. Examples included: Knot Allen's fire making class, Larry Dean Olsen and Tom Brown's spirituality of all skills, David Wescott's ideas that gatherings are a place where everyone should share knowledge, Digger's simple life with handmade tools, Andrew Dahl-Bredine's and Porangui's Brazilian drumming influence, DJibril's beliefs that drumming is about community, David Holladay's way of teaching people to be teachers. Cultural traditions of giving thanks for the creation of an item were not taught by many practitioners, however. This may be because these skills come from so many cultures and appropriation is a line that everyone struggles to walk. Giving thanks in a way that is taken from someone else's culture while practicing a skill from that culture might feel too much like cultural appropriation. One co-researcher integrated giving thanks into her teaching practices as she emphasized for participants that everything had a spirit and that each item that they used in their making process had given itself to the process. The stories of the animal and plants were told to students in order to honor the lives that were given to the process of making. As we experience ancestral skills practice as a culture in itself, giving thanks to the lives of the materials is in keeping with the overall spirituality of the practice. Practitioners may simply have not shared this piece of their story, or may not be aware of the importance of this practice. It is possible that this is their final holdover in the disconnected world. It is easy to remember to give thanks to the people involved, but it is more difficult to recognize the materials as playing an equal role in the craftmaking process and thanking them for giving themselves to the process.

Returning Back

MacEachren defines this guidepost in the following way:

This guidepost pertains to the actions performed to acknowledge understanding of the ecological cycles of materials on Earth. It asks participants to question the harm or benefits their creations ultimately do to other living organisms and the ways humans can best minimize their impact so as to create a healthy sustainable system within which all creatures can live. It asks whether human practices of disposal are visible, healthy and capable of providing for long term survival of all living organisms. (MacEachren, 2001, p. 159)

The co-researchers in this study had the following experience:

Co-researchers were not directly asked about the end of this cycle for their materials and crafts. Two co-researchers made their crafts from recycled materials and found the joy in repurposing those materials for other uses. Several co-researchers discussed the desire to “live simply” and reduce their impact on the earth. Slowing down and making items that they could then wear and use in a simple, functional life was a goal for many participants. Co-researchers acknowledged and understood the impact that western culture had on the earth and several were actively seeking an alternative lifestyle.

In this section, I distinguished the findings of this study with prior research, citing Indigenous voices and supporting them with a study from a non-Indigenous researcher. This study, while unique in its focus, supported many of the ideas promoted by Indigenous educators. The need for connectedness is expressed by the Indigenous educators and researchers is also expressed by co-researchers in this study and their experience of connectedness is in line with the goals presented by Indigenous researchers. Next, I will discuss the social and professional implications of these findings.

Social And Professional Implications

Nature and community connectedness have been studied at length as separate topics, but their separation has been called into question in more recent literature. The “need to belong” can manifest itself similarly in a natural setting and in a community setting, implying that those who experience true connectedness are satisfying that need through both nature and community connection (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). This dissertation began as a project to define community and nature connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education. The experiences of co-researchers led me to a greater understanding of connectedness and of the path from the disconnected to the connected world.

Environmental education calls for bridging this gap and often implements academic ways to do so. Informing children about the degradation of the world around them and asking them to engage in research projects about renewable energy and recycling seem like a path to greater understanding of environmental issues, but may in fact have the effect of making children feel small, afraid and helpless to fix the problems of the world (Louv, 2008). However, developing a generation of students who no longer adhere to anthropocentric viewpoints and ways of walking through the world may be as simple as fostering a path to the connected world. In this study, practitioners of Ancestral Skills Education reflected on their journey from the disconnected to the connected world, as well as their experiences of being connected people living in the disconnected world. Many of the ideas shared by practitioners resembled pedagogical guidance given by Indigenous educators. This suggests that the Indigenous knowledge of the connected world, and pedagogy based on Indigenous ways of seeing the world are powerful resources in the effort to move people away from an anthropocentric viewpoint. Western

adaptations of Indigenous methods of teaching and learning including experiential education, apprenticeship and informal education were discussed in the literature review. These ideas were central to education long before the introduction of Western schooling. The following are social and professional implications for the current study. These points can be used to develop further research or can help to shape an environmental education program that is based on connectedness.

1. Children are connected to nature. The majority of the co-researchers in this study spoke about a childhood that was filled with time in nature. Not only did they spend time in nature, but they interacted with nature. They built forts, they fished and hunted, they tested their courage by wandering without parents, they foraged and they camped. Louv and Young both asserted that it's not enough to simply get kids outside, they need to interact with nature in order to experience it (Louv, 2008; Young, 2018). This study supports their claims. Co-researchers also talked about the willingness of kids at ancestral skills gatherings and outdoor schools to engage in a deeper relationship with nature and with each other. When removed from the competitive environment of Western culture, they can easily shift back into non-competitive, supportive play.
2. Adults and older children might not be able to connect with nature without experiencing some sort of transformational event or through learning a transformational skill. This is an important observation by co-researchers for two reasons. First, teenagers (or preteens) who are put in the woods may not run out and build forts in the same way that small children will. Second, teens and adults who enjoy recreating in nature may not actually be feeling connectedness. If they

see nature through an anthropocentric lens, they may see the outdoors as a commodity that exists for their enjoyment. One co-researcher had experiences with disconnected friends who loved to hike but sat down and ate Cliff Bars when there was plenty of food to forage along the side of the trail. Another worked with teens who were both scared and overstimulated by the natural setting found 100 yards off the main road. For two co-researchers, their lives were transformed when they learned survival skills as instructors in wilderness therapy programs.

3. Simple activities can initiate the shift from the disconnected world to the connected world. Some of these activities were identified by co-researchers as foraging, building shelters, starting fires, flintknapping and making cordage. Co-researchers identified often directly identified a mentor who shared these skills with them.
4. Connectedness starts people down a path to simple living, Some co-researchers found this connectedness as children and never quite understood the disconnected world. Others found a mentor whose life they wanted to emulate and slowly transformed their lives to match their mentors. Some did not explicitly say that they were on a path to simple living, but described their experiences living simply at ancestral skills gatherings as the times that they lived for.
5. A spiritual connection to ancestral skills is important for true connectedness. This implication supports Cajete's (1994) assertion that education needs to begin with a base of spirituality. This is easy to see when our goal is to position ourselves as a part of nature instead of as dominant to nature. It would follow that we would understand the spiritual nature of the world around us.

6. Music and drumming can be an important piece of deeper, spiritual connection.

Co-researchers talked about singing, drumming, dancing and spontaneous music making as an important feature of their connected world. These experiences were discussed in the context of a Tribal or ancestral skills gathering setting. Music, as part of a daily experience, may be a way of encouraging connectedness and spirituality without explicitly discussing “spirituality”. One co-researcher found that drumming wasn’t about making music, it was about making community. Learning to communicate with each other without words created a deeper bond between participants.

7. Ancestral skills gatherings can be used as a model for creating connectedness, rooted in Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. The characteristics of this connected community can also be described as a community of practice, using Lave and Wenger’s (1991) definition. Co-researchers experienced some characteristics of a connected culture by attending ancestral skills gatherings:

1. sharing information - Information sharing occurred across generations, transcended disabilities and contributed to the growth of practitioners. Information was not seen as proprietary and the culture of sharing was enforced by elders, who led primarily by example.
2. de-emphasizing commerce - This is an important aspect of shifting away from a Western view of education. Barajas-López and Bang (2018) contrasted Indigenous making with the current maker movement. The maker movement is based in a commerce centered

understanding of the world and perpetuates disconnectedness. By creating environments where commerce is not an underlying theme (making to sell, buying materials without thought of their origin, not thinking about the purpose of a made item, etc.) ancestral skills gatherings give people an opportunity to value made items through a non-Western lens.

3. becoming mentors - Moving from apprentice to mentor was a path that co-researchers just saw as a natural progression. Even those who did not plan to teach found a way to share information in a one-on-one setting. Those who were mentors still learned from others, demonstrating that mentor status did not mean that they were done learning. Learning was viewed as a life-long process and gatherings were a place where learning opportunities were limitless.
4. honoring elders - Elders and mentors were honored by most co-researchers. They were not only cited as the source of skills, but they were held up as models for acceptable behaviors. Some co-researchers were concerned with learning knowledge from elders before they passed away, worrying that the knowledge held by elders would not be passed on if they did not make it a point to learn from them.
5. emotional safety - Emotional safety provides the foundation for teaching and learning at the gatherings attended by co-researchers.

This safety was created by the non-competitive and non-judgmental environment experienced at each gathering. One co-researcher compared it to the environment of wilderness therapy. This again fits with Cajete's (1994) description of Indigenous education. Safety also sits on Maslow's hierarchy, right below belonging and connectedness.

Further Research

The current study was an attempt to describe the experiences of community and nature connectedness shared by ten practitioners of Ancestral Skills Education. The result was a four-part composite textural-structural description of their experiences in the disconnected world, their life journey, their experiences as a teacher and learner, and their experiences at ancestral skills gatherings. Their experience provided a wealth of information that could lead to future research questions. Ancestral Skills Education has not been studied extensively in the literature and shows promise as a way to help people become more connected with their communities and their natural environment, promoting environmentally and community friendly behaviors. Further research can explore this connectedness and quantify this phenomenon.

The contexts and methods of Ancestral Skills Education follow many of the recommendations made by Cajete in his call to shift American education to an Indigenous model. Ancestral skills gatherings in particular seem to emulate Cajete's proposed milieu for experiential and apprenticeship learning. Several co-researchers in this study emphasized the spiritual aspect of their craft, which also supports Cajete's

Indigenous model of education. Further research can explore the environment of ancestral skills gatherings as examples of Cajete's Indigenous model of education.

Mentorship is a theme in ancestral skills education from the first practitioners. Coyote mentoring was a phrase coined by Jon Young to describe his relationship with Tom Brown, who in turn was mentored by Stalking Wolf. Co-researchers in this study talked about their mentors as people who not only taught them a craft, but as people who shared a way of life with them. Mentorship is not a highly practical skill in traditional education, as the student to teacher ratio is just too high. However, research on the mentorship process in Ancestral Skills Education could shed light on how educators might be able to leverage mentors from the community to both share skills and promote community connectedness.

Communities of Practice have been defined by Lave and Wenger (1991) as groups where newcomers participate in a peripheral fashion, developing their skills to become full members of the community. Ancestral skills gatherings are examples of communities of practice where most practitioners learn skills for non-commercial purposes, with the goal of experiencing a deeper connection with community and the natural world. These models of effective teaching and learning further support Lave and Wenger's theory and call into question the validity of schooling as our dominant form of education. Further research could be done on ancestral skills gatherings as communities of practice.

Finally, several co-researchers identified spirituality as a necessary ingredient for connectedness in Ancestral Skills Education. This is an idea that would benefit from further exploration. Is there in fact, a connection between spirituality and connectedness

in the practice of Ancestral Skills Education? Could connectedness occur without spirituality? Does spirituality contribute to a more intense interest in the subject or a deeper connection with the skills? Further research could also explore the spirituality in Ancestral Skills Education with the spiritual base of Indigenous education as presented by Cajete.

Limitations

The current study was based on the experiences of ten practitioners of Ancestral Skills Education. The resulting composite textural-structural description was created by the stories that they shared and the imaginative variation of the researcher. This description is limited by the stories that they told and was ultimately presented through the lens of the researcher. My co-researchers all identified as being from the dominant culture. One did mention some Native American heritage and one was part Cuban, but all co-researchers lived in and experienced Western culture as members of the dominant culture. Seven of my co-researchers identified as men and three identified as women. All but one co-researcher grew up in the 1960s-1980s. Many of the commonalities in co-researchers' experiences can be explained as the result of pulling from a small pool of co-researchers in a relatively small geographic area. For example, many of the co-researchers were LDS or had been part of the LDS church. This is the result of having a large LDS population in this particular community of ancestral skills practitioners. Practitioners from a different geographic location may have a different understanding of religion and its relationship to spirituality. In addition, some practitioners had extreme beliefs that are more commonly held in this geographic area. Their surprise at everyone's

ability to get along may come from living in an area where people are polarized by their beliefs and do not intermingle with people from different belief systems.

In addition, most of these practitioners had very specific ancestral skills gathering experiences in common. These practitioners had four gatherings in common: Rabbitstick, Between the Rivers, Fire to Fire and Wintercount. While not all practitioners attended each of these gatherings, everyone had attended at least one. These events have many things in common and Rabbitstick provided the basic model (and many of the instructors) for each of the other three. With the exception of Anna, each co-researcher shared stories that related to their experiences at ancestral skills gatherings. However, Anna's experience in a Tribal setting seemed to validate the Indigenous nature of some of the shared experiences. It is possible that practitioners who attended other gatherings in different geographic locations would have identified a different core environment and model. Taylor (2010) found a similar culture presented by ancestral skills practitioners in the Rendezvous culture. My participants were strongly rooted in the ancestral skills gathering community, but had they been in the rendezvous community, would they have found connectedness in that culture? Hari expressed enjoyment at barter faire events, discussing the friendships he made dog soldiering with others in full highland gear. Bo, however, could not find connectedness in the rendezvous community, citing the effects of consumerism that Taylor found as the primary motivation for those events.

Conclusion

The story of Ancestral Skills Education can't be told without acknowledging the struggle of the antimodernist movement beginning with the second industrial revolution. Many of the mental health issues discussed by Louv in 2005 were first presented by

Beard in 1880, and confirmed by his contemporaries, as ailments that did not even exist in his grandparents' generation (Jackson Lears, 1994). Antimodernist agendas have been promoted in many ways over the years, including Woodcraft in the early part of the 20th century, the Arts and Crafts movement, the Back to the Land movement of the 60's and 70's, and the most recent survival skills and rewilding movements. The question asked by antimodernists has always run counter to the Western equation of progress to capital gain and the Western view of the earth as a commodity: is more actually better? Beginning with the Belgrade charter in the 1970s, the view of the United Nations began to align with the views of the antimodernists, calling for a new global ethic that “recognizes and sensitively responds to the complex relationships between man and nature and between man and man” (United Nations Environment Programme, 1975, p.1). Cajete (1994) revealed this to be the oldest global ethic, one that has been espoused by the very Indigenous cultures that are currently being destroyed by Western “progress”.

In order to embrace this “global ethic”, we may need to embrace the anti-modernist view and look to cultures who have continued their traditional ways of living, teaching and learning despite the direction imposed by the Western world. Cultures like the San Bushmen in the Kalahari may hold the key to understanding the value of living in the connected world. While it seems improbable that the momentum of capitalism can even be slowed, the Ancestral Skills Education movement gives a new voice to the antimodern perspective and presents new opportunities for Western people to live in the connected world. Ancestral Skills Gatherings like Rabbitstick, Between the Rivers, Fire to Fire, and Wintercount give participants the opportunity to experience ways of teaching and learning that fall outside of the Western value system. In these environments,

knowledge is not framed as power, the marketplace does not decide an item's value, and spirituality is present for participants to experience at will. While many practitioners spend most of their days living in the disconnected world, they can easily return to their feeling of connectedness when they walk through the gate.

The Western viewpoint cannot help but be anthropocentric, a people-first understanding of the natural world. Framing the world in this way, it seems impossible for Environmental Education to accomplish the goals of the Belgrade Charter or the more recent vision of the NAAEE, "A just and sustainable world where environmental and social responsibility drive individual, institutional, and community choices" (NAAEE, n.d.). We have to look to other ways of knowing and acknowledge even the possibility that "progress" is not progress before we are able to even begin to accomplish these goals. By definition, community and nature connectedness create social and environmental responsibility. Shifting the foundation of Environmental Education to embrace an eco-centric view of the natural world, nature-as-community instead of nature-as-commodity, will require us to look to Indigenous leaders for guidance on reframing education as it has been for thousands of years prior to the introduction of Western schooling.

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Appendix A: Individual Textural and Structural Descriptions

Anna

Textural Description

Anna spent much of her childhood outdoors. Her parents chose houses near wilderness and always had gardens full of vegetables when she was growing up. Her dad was a school teacher and incorporated many wilderness awareness skills into his classroom. They played stalking games on a regular basis and learned about local plants and animals. The school was located next to the woods and students played out there daily. Even if it rained, they brought the proper rainwear and went out to play. She grew up in Bonners Ferry, Idaho and participated in a community of Christian families who had weekly potlucks where every person was free to share something they had been learning, or to lead in singing a song.

Two years after graduating from university, after living in Germany for a year, she moved to California and met up with some people who were a part of the primitive skills community. They showed her a movie, “The Great Dance”, which reminded her of a deep longing she had had in college to be with the Bushman people and learn from them. During this time, she also had an experience with her grandmother that made a deep impression on her. She moved out into the country and her grandmother was very afraid for her to live out on her own, away from people. Anna felt that this was strange, as she felt safer living away from the city than in the city, but reflected that we all seem to have different manifestations of fear and awe towards the natural world.

Anna went on an expedition to learn skills from the Naro Bushman community in Africa, as part of a program with Jon Young and Nicole Apelain. While many aspects of

the program did not line up with Anna's expectations, she learned so much from the tribe. She not only learned skills, but felt their sense of community and their deep connection to each other, to "Creator" and to the earth. In her time with this tribe, she had several experiences that both made her feel like she was connected with community and nature, and made her long to have this connection in her everyday life. In one experience, Anna felt afraid and in need of connection when she walked back to her sleeping quarters from the fire and was startled by a Kudu antelope. The Kudu was imitating the "bark" of a leopard about to pounce. She felt comforted and heard by her community when she returned to the fire and they listened to her story, held space for her fear and helped her understand what she had heard. When Anna spent time with the tribe, they danced and sang together. One amazing moment was when she danced with one of her tribal mentors. She had an incredible experience when the group was huddled in a shelter because of the rain and they sang a song. One of the elders said that they should stop singing that song because they were making it rain harder. When they changed the song, the sun came out and it felt like they sang the sun in. Anna also appreciated the way that children were raised by the tribe in the Kalahari. She observed children playing and not being forced to do work. Some children observed the adults and as they got older, they jumped in to help. Anna was most profoundly inspired by the Naro method of discipline for their children: the "aunties" and "uncles" (other adult tribe members) had the responsibility to discipline the children and the mothers and fathers were responsible for comforting their own children after they were reprimanded. Anna admits that she may be putting this tribe on a "pedestal" since she only spent a short time with them.

Another aspect of the community life which inspired Anna was their peer to peer accountability and their circle process for decision making. They told her and her group about how they had learned the hard way that alcohol is not something their bodies can tolerate, so they had made a conscious decision to become a dry community. They would monitor tribal members who returned to the community after visiting the city, and ask them if they had consumed alcohol. Anna observed that there was no discipline that was familiar to her, but "they'll give him some time to just reconnect with themselves and with nature. It's very gentle." She only witnessed one argument within the tribe and this shut things down until it was resolved. The argument was about who was the oldest person in the tribe. The two oldest tribal members, a man and a woman, both believed that they were the oldest. Anna observed, "They decided that Xnaba (the woman) was older. And they decided that because she is a woman and also because Haneman (the man) is the healer and they wanted balance, because the oldest person gets to have the last word." Some day, Anna might do a slideshow at a skills gathering talking about her Kalahari trip because she believes that she found that tribal connection that many in the skills world are trying to find.

Two experiences in the last few weeks have reminded Anna of her longing to go deeper with nature awareness. In the first, she was sitting by the Spokane river not far from her home, with two friends who have years of experience with primitive skills and wilderness awareness, Anna made cordage by harvesting local plants. As they sat around in a circle, she had deja vu from one of the moments with the tribe in the Kalahari. Members of the tribe had shown her how to make cordage quickly by rubbing the plant and loosening the fibers on your leg. Her friend in Spokane showed her the same

technique, even though the teachers were in very different environments and from very different cultures. The second reminder came days later when she decided to treat an abscessed tooth using plantain. She had not researched the plant, only heard that it was supposed to help, so she used it without drinking enough water. This mistake made her very sick, and when she began researching in order to discover what she had done wrong (and what she could do to recover), she learned being dehydrated while chewing plantain can lead to death.

Structural Description

Anna's experiences with skills have been as a student and independent learner who is hungry for more information. She has learned cordage from three different sets of teachers: a Nature Connection teacher Spokane, a weaver in Botswana, and members of a tribe in the Kalahari. Anna found the similarities between her experiences felt like "deja vu". She learned similar techniques from all three and had a similar feeling of connection to the group in Spokane and her experiences in southern Africa. A particular moment when both the teacher in Spokane and the teacher in the Kalahari showed Anna how to loosen the fibers by rubbing the plant on your leg felt so familiar to Anna in both locations.

Anna went on an expedition to learn skills from a tribal community in Africa, as part of a program with Jon Young and Nicole Apelain. While she was living with this tribe, she had several experiences that both made her feel like she was connected with community and nature, and made her long to have this connection in her everyday life. Anna can find this feeling in short bursts in experiences with her local primitive skills community, specifically discussing the parallels between a recent outing to make cordage

and her experience of learning to make cordage from the tribe. She would like to be “able to help other people get in touch with that experience of being human.” She experienced her own connection when dancing and singing with members of the tribe. One amazing moment was when she danced with one of her tribal mentors. She had an incredible experience when the group was huddled in a shelter because of the rain and they sang a song. One of the elders said that they should stop singing that song because they were making it rain harder. When they changed the song, the sun came out and it felt like they sang the sun in.

For Anna, part of our disconnect with nature is the fact that we have “removed ourselves from death.” She points to the ceremony around burying our dead where we dress people up and paint their faces with make up. She feels that people in the primitive skills community are trying to reconnect to nature and community by moving away from the western understanding of the world. When Anna went on her trip to the Kalahari, she experienced a let down with her western trip leaders, but found that her teachers were really the tribe that they had come to observe.

Religion has been an important part of Anna’s life. She grew up in a Christian Living Room Fellowship in Northern Idaho. She felt that her connection to religion would make her a good missionary for the tribal people that she visited in the Kalahari, until she realized that they had a deeper connection to the creator than she had experienced in her life. Anna wants to see people “set free” and connected with the creator, but does not feel that organized religion can make that connection. She wonders, “if nature connection will lead humanity back into an intimacy with the divine that is not

full of the baggage that religions have weighed us down with and really wounded humanity with.”

Anna sees nature connection as both seeking the knowledge of the natural world and accepting the potential chaos and danger found in the natural world. She had an experience in the Kalahari where she startled a Kudu and it made a noise that caused her to feel like she was in danger. She ran back to the fire, seeking comfort and safety with the group. This experience made her aware of her own mortality. She also Anna had another experience where she did not properly research an herbal treatment prior to attempting it. She was using Plantain to pull the toxins from her abscessed tooth. She did not realize that she needed to drink a lot of water while using it because it could cause a severe drop in blood pressure and could even result in death. She came close to that as she did not drink rough water. This experience helped Anna to form an even greater nature connection as she realized that nature gave us opportunities to acknowledge our own mortality. Her time with the Bushmen in the Kalahari made her wish that she could feel the same kind of nature connection that they felt, when she was at home in Spokane.

Ben

Textural Description

Ben’s story began in 2009, the year he went to Rabbitstick, his first gathering. He had lost his business in a fire and emotionally felt about as low as he could be. His wife had just left him, taking their children. Ben is an alcoholic and had just relapsed, so he was working hard at reaching 30 days of sobriety. He went to work with a friend, growing organic food on a truck farm. They had very little cash, but always had food that they were able to barter, so they “ate like kings”. In the fall of 2009, he saw a kid on the

side of the road, pushing his bike with two flat tires. Ben stopped and talked to the kid, worried that he was going to get arrested just for looking the way he did. He found out that the kid planned to jump a train to Rexburg. Ben and his partner convinced the kid to work for them for a few days, then, after selling produce at the Farmers Market on Saturday, they would give him a ride to Rexburg. Over the next few days, the kid described the place that he was trying to go and Ben is intrigued. They decided to go in with him and take a look around. This is how Ben arrived at his first Rabbitstick.

When he walked through the gate, he saw people living simply and happily, he saw the community and immediately felt like this was the place that he had been looking for all his life. That first day, he met many of the instructors and confirmed his initial thought that this was a group of like minded people. They were the “tribe” who could drive to the end of the road and live there in a bus, an image that he had always had of the ultimate community. Ben felt so strongly about his connection to them that he found out what they needed for their classes, trying to be helpful and share the currency that he had: his time, his stuff and his connections in the local community. He returned to Pocatello to grab things from his personal collection and his community, including a road-killed deer that an instructor needed for a class. He also grabbed a box of Bannock-Shoshone beaded earrings that he had gotten from an estate sale, and his unicycle.

When he returned Sunday night, he had missed the opening of the gathering, so he wasn't aware that he had to pay. His new friend Andrew took care of him, gave him a place to sleep and they instantly became “kindred brothers”. He dropped off a 104 qt cooler of food for the kitchen, a donation from his farm. That evening, he went and sat around the fire. He listened to several of the elders, including Dave Holladay, share their

philosophies. At dinner the following night, he realized that he had to pay a fee for the event. He went down and spoke with one of the organizers, explaining his story. She let him know that the day rate was \$80. He promised to pay them daily, so she sent him up to eat dinner with the promise that he would return the next day with payment.

The next day, he started hustling up the money by selling earrings on the side of the road and made many friends in the process. He traded up for different items including a buckskin vest and a thunderbird pendant. He even gave someone a unicycle lesson, and later that person became an important friend. He talked with people, shared ideas, and met elders. He felt guilty about selling the earrings just to get the money, but it was important for him to be there, so he was “selling [his] soul” for the opportunity. Each day, he was able to pay his way. However, after each morning of selling, he was not able to get into any classes. They usually started in the morning and instructors were not excited about having him join halfway through their class. His friend Andrew showed him the central bulletin board where classes were posted for the next day. On Wednesday, he made his money early and decided to take a class with Hawk. Hawk was an intimidating looking person dressed in a capote and carrying a 357. Ben described him, “He's got bear claws and bear teeth all over on his necklace and he looks just so mean, he is definitely not someone you want to piss off. “ When Ben was approaching to take Hawk's class, he overheard Hawk having a conversation with a teenager who wanted to take his class. Hawk asked the girl if she would share the information that he taught in his class if someone asked her to. The girl said no and Hawk colorfully informed her that she would not be able to take his class. When Hawk asked Ben the same question, Ben made sure to say yes and was able to take Hawk's class.

On Thursday night, it was “Mask Night”, a drumming and dancing event at Rabbitstick. Ben felt that getting his mask right was very important, “the last thing I wanted to do was piss off the creator by showing up to a masquerade with the wrong mask on or depicting the wrong spirit animal.” He went to the local library and looked for books that could show him masks from Native Americans or other cultures. He found a Zuni mask that depicted the white man, used to teach children to stay away from the man who made promises that he wouldn’t keep. He returned to camp and used scraps and odds and ends to create his own version of this mask. It looked like a zorro mask made from buckskin. However, when the night came, Ben felt the weight of his sadness. He was “heart broken”. He saw a girl that he had been enamored with during the week, dancing as the centerpiece in a performance. She was dancing with the kid he had first tried to help. The kid had worked all week to make a tulle buffalo robe and skull. They were telling a story with their dance and the story ended with the boy throwing his robe into the fire, creating a burst of flame and signaling for the dancing to begin. Ben could not dance and after he tried to go around the circle a few times, he was crying. Andrew took him aside and said, “What are you crying about? This is like New Years Even and Halloween and all the holidays all rolled into one. This is the most important day of the year right here.” After regaining his composure, he and Andrew danced until 3:30 or 4 that night, when the drums finally stopped.

At the end of the week, he went to give Dave Wescott his money that final time and Dave Wescott would not take it, telling him that he had done enough. When Ben asked one of the elders what that meant, he was told that the elders had listened and that he had shared a lot of good ideas over the course of the week. The elders had decided that

Ben was an important part of the gathering tribe. He was told, “And now, we couldn't imagine having another gathering without you in it.” The last day, everyone had to pack up and it was again a sad moment. This is the point where Ben started living 52 weeks at a time, counting down to the next Rabbitstick.

Ben became better and better friends with Brad Wade. A few years ago he had a relapse and Brad was a supportive friend. Ben decided that recovery once and for all was a priority, so he found a good outpatient program, worked with some mentors who were also beekeepers, and skipped Rabbitstick for the first and only time since 2009. During that time, he and Ben talked about how spirit animals were coming into Ben's life on a regular basis. Brad invited Ben to come teach at Fire to Fire. Brad talked him into his first experience as an instructor. He asked him to give a talk to the teenage boys and help them to make better decisions. Brad mentioned that it was important that the talk was “non-denominational”. Ben chose to talk with them about Animal Medicine and asked for support from Scott Wright, his mentor. He did a lot of research prior to teaching that class because it was important to him that he share accurate information with the boys.

After that talk, Brad honored Ben's need to be a student, and he let him go take classes for the rest of the gathering. Ben went and took a stack knife class from Dave Holladay. This was his third year of that class, so he spent most of this time helping the first year students. At the end of the week, Dave asked him to come to Rabbitstick and be his assistant there. Because Dave was one of the elders, he could just call Dave Wescott and let him know. When Dave Holladay called Dave Wescott, he let him know that Ben had changed and was clearly ready to take the next step. When they went to Rabbitstick, Dave Holladay told Ben that he would rather have Ben be the teacher and Dave be the

assistant. At the end of the week, Ben met with both of them and Dave Holladay officially passed the torch so that Ben could be the stack knife teacher. He came into teaching the skills through being an apprentice and then taking over when the elders thought he was ready. Ben is now known as a skilled knifemaker. He can sell his knives for a high price, but often just makes them to give a way to friends.

Structural Description

Ben's experience of his first gathering was less about the skills and more about the community. He was brought to this community by "the kid", a fellow traveler. Throughout Ben's story, the kid never got a name, but he is revered in Ben's mind as the traveler who brought him home to his people. Upon first arrival, Ben felt like Rabbitstick, a large ancestral skills gathering in Rexburg, was a place where he could fit in and be a part of something, co-exist with "likeminded people". Ben first came to Rabbitstick and felt bad about himself, like he was not living up to his potential. He experienced a community that immediately saw his strengths and talents, and were patient with what he saw as his weaknesses. Ben felt that the classes were secondary, that "We're just a bunch of lovers who use primitive skills as an excuse to get together." At his first gathering, he met people who we would forever consider to be his family, including his "kindred brother" Andrew, who gave him a bed to sleep in on his first night, and Brad Wade, a close friend who would go on to convince Ben to become an instructor.

Ben saw the primitive skills gathering community as his tribe. He immediately felt and respected the structure, where there were clearly knowledgeable elders running the show. These elders had power over decisions because they had demonstrated their skills over the years and their commitment to the community. His first night, he sat

around the fire and listened to the philosophies of elders like Dave Holladay, who would eventually become his mentor. Over the course of a decade, he discovered a hierarchy of elders including Dave Holladay who have high levels of influence over events and structure; leaders like Dave Wescott who run large events like Rabbitstick and upcoming leaders like Brad Wade, who demonstrate their love for others through the structure of their smaller events. Ben felt that he spent the first part of his life looking for his tribe and the second part of his life being guided and saved by his tribe. His people believed in living simply, leaning on and entrusting in the people around them, and showing the next generation how possible it was to live simply. At the end of his first gathering, the elders met and decided that he was an important part of their tribe.

Ben references and follows a very tribal hierarchy throughout his journey. He speaks of the elders, the proper chain of respect, and the feeling of community. He felt like he was “inducted” into the tribe at his first Rabbitstick. When Ben spoke about his tribe, he mentioned several names of teachers, many of whom had passed away. These were both people who had influenced his personal path and people who had shaped the community in a larger way. It was important to Ben that he honored his elders.

Ben’s experience at this gathering and his feeling of community is tied to his understanding of currency. He talked about being cash poor, but living like a king because he had plenty of food, enough produce to barter for meat and other things he might need. At his first Rabbitstick, he needed to come up with the entry fee, so he sold earrings on the side of the road to raise the money. He also donated food to the kitchen and helped instructors by giving them materials. While selling earrings, he met other community members who were also cash poor but were excited to trade and gift him

items. He traded up to a buckskin vest and got a thunderbird pendant from Kandis, a fellow vendor. He also gave Kandis a unicycle lesson. By the end of the week, he didn't have to work to pay the entry fee anymore because he had contributed to the gathering in other ways, by providing ideas and suggestions for improvement to the elders of the community. To Ben, this was confirmation that this group thought like him and saw that cash was only one form of currency.

Ben was a member of the LDS church, then left the church a few years before his first Rabbitstick, in search of a different spiritual connection. As he journeyed through life after that, animals played a large role in his spiritual understanding of the world. He came back to the church later, but did so in a way that incorporated animal medicine and other practices that were outside the belief system of the church. He believes that all of these traditions can coexist and talks about meditation and readings alongside his Christian faith. The dance at mask night, with the boy as buffalo and the girl as a raven seemed to set Ben on this path of understanding Animal Medicine. Ben's connection to the kid and to the animal world both drive his story of initial connection, even though he doesn't realize his animal world connection until later in life. When Ben was asked by Brad to teach teen boys to make good decisions, his first thought was to teach Animal Medicine with the help of his mentor, Scott Wright. Over the years, Ben moves from a world centered on the creator to a world that is heavily influenced by Animal Medicine.

Ben wasn't initially drawn to skills gatherings because he was trying to master skills that were practiced. When the kid who initially brought him to Rabbitstick told him about the skills that were being practiced, he thought they were kind of cool and this is why he initially decided to come to the gathering. He had no prior knowledge of the

skills, though he was a hunter. However, when he got there, he realized that there were so many people teaching and learning skills and he was hungry for knowledge. He was not planning on becoming an instructor. He was happy to just be a student and learn as much as he could. However, he was taking classes from people he wanted to learn from, regardless of the skills they were teaching, so Ben felt that all this time he was actually learning how to be a good teacher. In the end, having Dave Holladay recognize that he was ready to become a teacher, more of a leader in his tribe, and having this confirmed by Dave Wescott, was an affirmation to Ben and created a strong feeling of self worth. Ben talks about his skills as a knife maker as if they came to him magically and is humble about his talents, but admits that his knives ultimately command a high price when he chooses to sell them. For Ben, this skill did not come about by talent or initial ability, but rather by finding a member of his tribe that he wanted to emulate and following his path.

Bo

Individual Textural Description

Bo was 18 when he took a college course that included a camping trip, his first real outdoor experience. He immediately felt at home in the outdoors and wanted to have more experiences. Since he had already purchased the expensive gear, he thought it would be a good idea to take a trip. The summer between his freshman and sophomore year, he went on a 30 day, 500 mile hike down the Appalachian Trail, experiencing the outdoors in a way that changed him forever. Bo finished school and took a job as a trail walker with a wilderness therapy program. While in the program, he learned to be comfortable in all settings, and how to relate to teenagers, along with some primitive skills. After this, he got married and started a family.

Bo was really interested in the stone knives and arrowheads that he saw on display in Moab gift shops. He tried to find out how to make these knives, but just couldn't find much information beyond books. There seemed to be no willing teachers, and those who created these objects were very secretive, protecting their profits and hold on the market. Bo finally found a teacher, through a connection that his wife and her mother had. This teacher, an older veteran, had a pretty outdated method, but got Bo hooked on "chipping" and traded him materials for finished blades. Bo felt like he needed to spend every day flint knapping, he enjoyed it so much. He began a club at the university where he worked, in order to share skills and information about flint knapping. This upset many of the people who were profiting off making stone blades, but Bo felt that this information needed to be shared with others. Bo travelled to art shows and rendezvous, selling the items that he made.

Bo has been attending rendezvous for 15-20 years and has just recently been able to attend primitive skills gatherings, since retiring from his university job. At the rendezvous, he experienced people practicing skills, but did not find a community that was driven to learn new skills. The participants were primarily focused on making money. He has experienced an entirely different community at the skills gatherings and compared the environment to the "emotionally safe" environment they tried to set up in wilderness therapy. He has been attending gatherings for two years and has found that the instructors are very willing to share their ideas and that there is virtually no competition between experts. He has reconnected with old friends and made new friendships that feel like he has had them forever.

Bo has attended most gatherings as a student, but spent the majority of his time in the knapping pit, working on pieces that he could sell at art shows. The one gathering that Bo attended as an instructor was stressful for him because he felt obligated to be available to students at all times. At the end of this week, he had a great experience when a group of women shared with him how much they had enjoyed his class, but he would prefer to attend as a student from this point forward so that he didn't have that pressure. Bo had a particularly enlightening experience at Rabbitstick, when he participated in a hammerstone class. Bo considers himself to be an expert flintknapper, but he was not familiar with hammerstone, which is essentially flint knapping using rocks instead of using copper tools. After a short amount of instruction, he was able to pick up the technique and produce a piece that he was proud of. He attributed this to the quality of instruction, but expressed pride in being able to learn a new aspect of his craft.

Individual Structural Description

Bo's experience with primitive skills education is delineated by his feelings about community, support and fairness. His early experiences with wilderness therapy were of a positive, supportive environment where kids were given the tools to succeed and then not judged on their ability or desire to pick up and use those tools. Bo felt like he had learned so much from wilderness therapy that he shouldn't have been paid for his time. He saw many of the other trail walkers not learning the same lessons, though, because they weren't able to get comfortable in that environment. When Bo first began flint knapping, he had a difficult time even finding someone who would teach him the basics. He hated that the professionals guarded their secrets and once he learned, he began a club to teach others. He also sold his products for what he thought was a fair value. The combination

of these things prompted those who had sold for higher to send him hate mail and speak badly of him.

Bo found real connection to those who practice his craft and others who practice other skills, like pottery, when he attended Rabbitstick, his first primitive skills gathering. He only began attending gatherings two years ago, after he retired from his job at the university and started selling his pieces as his primary income. Bo has made several different types of connections at primitive skills gatherings. He has met people who he looked up to in primitive skills crafts, for example, a potter that he had heard of for a long time and knew that he was a highly respected person in this field. Bo was excited that this person would come and flint knap with him, sitting and talking and learning together. He also connected with people who he had known from his past. He reconnected with someone from his wilderness therapy days, as well as with a student who used to come to his flint knapping club. In addition, he has made many new friends, creating connections with people that are so strong that he feels like he has known them for a long time. He attributes that to both the sharing of skills and the emotionally safe environment of the skills gatherings.

According to Bo, within this community people are able to make and maintain friendships with people who have different beliefs, but have come to the gathering for similar reasons. The culture is one of giving back, sharing knowledge with others and allowing people to just be themselves. Bo stated, "I don't feel any ulterior motives. I don't feel like anyone's talking to me because they want something. I don't feel like anyone's there to fill up their wallet." One thing that Bo appreciates about skills gatherings is the lack of ego and willingness to teach by those who are considered experts in their field. Bo

has had many experiences where he has worked together with other experts to teach new students.

Bo decided to come to the gatherings and pay to be a student, even though he spent pretty much all of his time in the knapping pit. He didn't want the pressure of having to teach, though he was very happy to jump in and help with classes that others were teaching. He had a very different experience when he came as an instructor and felt that he had to teach all of the time. It felt very restrictive and even though he was teaching about the same amount, he felt like he owed people a good experience and it was a lot of pressure. Bo's experience as a student helped him to realize that he could always learn new techniques in flint knapping. He learned how to use a hammerstone, a primitive tool, from another instructor and was very pleased with his result. He appreciated how he could apply his knowledge as a flintknapper to this new skill and become fairly proficient at it in a short time.

As an example of the safe space provided at the gatherings, Bo told a story about a participant with autism. A number of years ago, this young man went to the knapping pit and insisted that the other teachers were doing it the wrong way and students should come learn from him. While this person is probably the best flintknapper Bo has ever seen, this type of attitude rubbed everyone the wrong way and this person was pretty much asked to leave the gatherings. But, when he was able to change the way he interacted with people, he was welcomed back and acknowledged for his abilities. Bo even witnessed a situation at a recent gathering where Dave Holladay, an elder known for his flint knapping ability, asked this person to fix a mistake that was happening on a project that he was trying to complete.

Prior to attending gatherings, Bo spent a lot of time at art shows and rendezvous. These places were filled with people who had similar skills and crafts, but the environment was different, and it brought out different personality traits in everyone. At a rendezvous, there would be people flint knapping, tanning hides and performing other skills, but they were not there to build community, they were there to sell. In the evenings, people would return to their camp, or to a local motel and not really socialize. There was lots of theft, so each vendor would be required to patrol the grounds for one or two nights per rendezvous. In his 15-20 years at the rendezvous, he did not make many lasting friendships.

Bo's experiences with his own childhood devoid of nature, students in the wilderness therapy and his own kids had a surprising twist when he spoke about the idea of bringing his kids to skills gatherings. He did not feel like it was a positive idea to force his own children to attend a gathering and have that experience, though he knew how important it was in his own life and could see the influence it had on the teenagers who were attending. His experience with kids who went to Rendezvous is that most of them would leave when they were teenagers and not come back. He was surprised by the teenagers at gatherings, who kept coming and really seemed to enjoy them. Bo would not "drag" his own kids to a gathering because they wouldn't have a good time and he feels like that would be forcing them to do something, equating it to dragging them to church. He is afraid of creating a negative experience for his kids, in the fear that they would reject the gatherings. This brings Bo's idea of emotional safety full circle, he felt that his kids needed to feel emotionally safe in order to embrace the true experience of the skills

gathering, hoping that they would discover it in their own time, not having been forced to attend.

Daniel

Textural Description

Daniel's childhood was full of experiences with nature. He spent most of his childhood playing outdoors, using found items as props and using his imagination to create adventures. One of his earliest memories is of a year when it rained so much, it flooded his yard. They found a piece of foam board and made a little boat. The water was only about 1.5 feet deep but 100 meters long, and the experience was magical. It felt like they were paddling around on their own little nature preserve. Another of his earliest memories was of going on hikes with his grandmother. His grandmother was a child during the depression and her family worked herding sheep. She pretty much lived outdoors. They didn't have much, so they foraged plants and made herbal medicine. Every once in a while, the owner of the sheep would come up and give them flour to make bread. She didn't go to school until she was 12 or 13 but Daniel observed that she got the education she needed prior to that.

When his grandmother took him on hikes, she would bring mayonnaise and bread. After hiking for a long time, they would sit down to eat. His grandmother would pick some watercress down by the river, putting it on the bread with the mayonnaise. Daniel felt that this was completely normal, all grandmothers must know where to find the right plants to eat out in the wilderness. In Daniel's understanding of the world, grown ups were connected with nature and had all of that important knowledge. Daniel then moved to Alaska, where his parents started a Montessori school. Even though Nature Montessori

wasn't really a thing at that point, this was the style of school they ran. After school, Daniel remembered leaving the house and heading out to the creek. He and his sister learned so much by being out in nature and having unstructured time. It was dangerous, there were bears and other ways a kid could get hurt, but they knew their boundaries and stayed safe.

Daniel didn't have much exposure to video games and was grateful that he grew up in a time where they were not prevalent. He could remember when his cousin got a Nintendo as a child, but recalled that he just couldn't sit still for long enough to play it. He didn't understand why everyone wanted to sit around and stare at a screen. When Daniel was a bit older, the family moved to Provo, Utah. He and his friends liked to play in a cornfield that was full of mice and snakes. One day, they decided to create a zoo and collected a bucket of mice and snakes for this purpose. After they brought the bucket back to his basement, they went around to their other friends to try and get people to come see their zoo. When they returned to their basement, they found that the bucket was empty. Daniel's mom was a very patient person, but this pushed her over the limit and she was pretty upset. They never did find most of the mice and snakes.

Daniel has drawn from his own childhood experiences when creating the environment in his private Montessori school. The playground at the school isn't a traditional playground with swings and teeter totters, they have logs and tires and sticks, things that can have multiple uses and encourage imaginative play. The stick could be a stick horse, then become a sword, "a stick can be a thousand things". Students are also encouraged to find their own boundaries through unstructured play. They might pile several tires up, then create a bridge across with a board. Through this unstructured play,

they develop their courage and find the safety boundaries with minimal adult intervention. At his school, they play a game called “Mr. Dan, can I eat this?” where kids bring over plants that they find and ask if they are edible. Daniel feels that if you want to connect a child to nature, the best way to start is by eating it. Along with lots of unstructured time and free play, Daniel teaches skills at his school. He has observed that using natural materials is important to child development. Natural materials are not uniform, so they create problems for students to solve.

One day at summer camp, they taught the students how to make corn husk dolls. They did not teach them how to make clothing, but they gave them lots of scraps and options for their clothing. The students played with the dolls for the rest of the week and took them home. For one student, it became her favorite toy and she played with it exclusively. Her mother called Daniel and asked when it was appropriate to throw the doll out, and Daniel suggested that she should not do that. He observed that after this lesson, students were highly motivated to make more dolls. They found grass and other materials to make dolls and would ask Daniel to show them how to make the dolls out of those materials. Because they were making dolls from so many materials, Daniel felt like they were learning other lessons, things like the proportion of the human body. They were also experiencing the properties of those materials and getting better at the skill, even though it was not the exact skill that they started with.

Daniel has had several notable experiences teaching at primitive skills gatherings. These gatherings can be a reflection of our culture, showing us some of the things that are causing us emotional harm in the modern world. He recently had an experience where a mother signed her son up for his bow making class at Fire to Fire. The mother was very

worried because the boy had ADHD and was on the autism spectrum. Daniel didn't worry about the boy because he felt that if making a bow was something the boy wanted to do, he could do it. Daniel observed that most of the disorders identified in a restrictive environment go away when we put those kids in nature and we remove the restrictions. Daniel let the boy know that he could take a break whenever he needed. The boy worked for hours on his bow and needed some scaffolding, but was dedicated and hard working. This was a very different experience than what the boy had when he learned in a traditional environment.

Daniel brought up the difference between making a fiberglass bow and a bow made from wood. If the bow were made from a piece of wood that you harvested yourself, it would have knots and growing patterns that would create challenges for building a bow. When people are forced to use natural materials, they need to do quite a bit of problem solving that would not happen in the regular world. He scaffolds his classes for students by removing many of the obstacles they might face creating a bow, so that they have a successful experience and can learn about the process. When teaching adults in a basket making class, Daniel witnessed our culture's judgement that you have to be good at something in order to do it. A few of the women who had joined his class immediately felt that their baskets weren't good. Daniel remarked that of course they weren't good, this was their first try at making a basket. Daniel let them know that the only way to get good at something was to practice and if they wanted to get better, they should make more baskets. The ones they made were good enough, given that they were their first attempt. Daniel reflected that our culture teaches us to only do things that we

are good at. Humans have always been artists, storytellers and songwriters, regardless of how “good” they were at these tasks. It is just something that humans do.

Daniel discussed the differences he had observed in children’s play at skills gatherings. In the outside world, he noted that children's lives are overly programmed and scheduled. They are given pre-packaged food in the morning, head to a very structured school day, have an afternoon of dance or organized sports lessons, then head home and watch tv, too exhausted to socialize with their family. Daniel observed that at the end of the day, you are too tired to tell our own stories, so you let “a multinational corporation come up with their stories and they are telling you the stories.” His experience at the gatherings is that children play together, making up their own games and working together to accomplish tasks. Daniel did see completion at the gatherings, but it was a different kind of competition. If one child was better at a skill than another, they would teach the other child and try to help them become better.

Daniel has had many experiences teaching groups of students from the city who have lost touch with nature. Even students who have grown up in supportive families did not have experiences with nature. Taking these students 100 yards off the road, they discover that everything is alive and this is both exciting and overwhelming to them. In one experience, students were afraid after they saw ants coming out of a log, so they would not sit on the ground during a fire making class. For students who are already in the corrections system, he has seen wilderness therapy work remarkably well, but he’d like to reach these kids before they wind up in the system. He feels that these students have had very different lives, citing a child in corrections who talked about how his grandmother taught him to sell drugs when he was 8. Daniel feels that we can still bring

nature into the classroom for these kids. We can introduce plants into the classroom that aren't just for looking at, but as something the students can use. Even pointing out spiders and bugs in the classroom helps the kids to know that nature is all around them, not something that they are distant from.

Structural Description

Daniel's experience early in his life shaped his ideas on nature connection and the importance of adults bringing these experiences to children. Primitive skills, for Daniel, are part of nature connection. When he talks about skills, he talks more about making things from natural materials, not necessarily focusing on the specific skill, like bowmaking. Plant identification and use was just part of Daniel's childhood. This kind of knowledge just helped him to feel more comfortable in a natural setting. Knowing how to find food down by the river gave him the ability to go out into the woods and stay fed. Knowing the plants and animals that lived around him helped him to feel safe and comfortable in the forest. The adults in Daniel's life were comfortable in nature and embraced nature as a teaching tool for children, so this is just what he thought it meant to be an adult.

Outside of his upbringing, Daniel has seen the world moving away from nature connection through more than just recreation. Daniel observed that, "there's a culture now that wants to treat nature like a piece of art. In a museum, you know, you look at it, but you don't touch it and you don't interact." This understanding of nature creates mental health issues and causes us to feel disconnected from each other. Daniel feels like our modern world drives our disconnection from nature. Just a generation ago, his dad worked on a farm and was out in nature every day. His grandmother grew up as a sheep

herder and lived much of her childhood outside. His cousin, though, got a Nintendo when they were kids and he watched that shift him into an indoor and sedentary life. As people spend less time interacting with nature, they seem to have more mental health issues.

Daniel has seen results with wilderness therapy and adjudicated youth, he feels like adults and children who are not yet in the criminal justice system would also benefit from being out in nature and learning about nature. The community matters as well, as Daniel observes a unique community building experience in both wilderness therapy and primitive skills gatherings.

Daniel draws from his childhood experiences with his grandmother to find the best way to connect kids with nature. He says, “If you want kids to appreciate and preserve nature. Get them to start eating nature. When they're eating nature, then they have that connection right now.” He has had many experiences as a field trip leader for kids from urban areas. In these experiences, the kids needed scaffolding to help them reconnect with nature, they couldn't just be thrown into it and be expected to thrive. His experience teaching kids from big cities was that even “being a hundred yards off the road was a huge nature experience.” For Daniel, this is such a huge contrast from what he sees as the success of his childhood. He wants to get to kids sooner and younger, so he runs an outdoor Montessori school like his parents did in Alaska. He not only feels that students who have attended nature programs have better problem solving abilities than other students, he also feels that they are happier, more connected and more aware of their personal limitations and boundaries. Daniel feels that as a society, we have become “risk adverse” and we don't allow kids to find their own boundaries. He points out that we still allow this with things like learning to walk, talk and ride a bike, but we are afraid

when kids take larger risks. At his school, they purposely create an unstructured playground so that kids can create their own spaces to explore and define their personal limits. In this playground, kids often create two stacks of tires and create a plank bridge across, testing their courage and establishing their boundaries. He says that it's the kids who don't learn to test their boundaries that get hurt, because they try to do the things the other kids do without first developing the skill set. Playgrounds like these seem like a simple solution for bringing kids back to this type of unstructured play, though Daniel does not feel that they would be permitted in most public schools due to safety issues.

The highly organized and over scheduled world that we live in is causing us harm, in Daniel's mind. It is causing mental health issues, causing people to feel less connected, and dampening our ability to problem solve. Daniel feels that people act very differently at a skills gathering than they do in the modern world. The kids don't play competitively, they play cooperatively. If one is better at a task, they will help another to get better at it as well. He feels that this kind of environment helps people to feel less anxious and shed many of the symptoms of mental health issues that they may display in a modern setting. Daniel does not like the idea that you have to be good at something in order to do it. He sees this idea played out in our modern culture. He feels that people have been doing things like making art and telling stories long before they were really good at them. He observes that often people don't do the things that they enjoy because they feel that they are not good enough at them. This view is perpetrated by our culture, where kids are driven to become better and better at sports and activities, and are not given the down time to experience creative, unstructured play.

David

Textural Description

David grew up in the Big Hole and the Bitterroot valley in Montana, surrounded by nature. His parents were teachers and did not do much in the outdoors. His grandfather ran bloodhounds and cougars chasing hounds. He took David out into nature quite a bit. David read a book by Larry Dean Olsen, “Outdoor Survival Skills” and practiced the skills that are described in the book. He was a member of the Boy Scouts and spent many of his weekends hiking and camping with the Boy Scouts in the Bob Marshall wilderness. He eventually became an Eagle Scout. David felt like he had a pretty normal childhood. He was not the most popular kid, but he was well liked and did fine in school. Nature was an important part of his childhood, and would help him to destress. He was raised “Montana Mormon”, a group that has slightly different beliefs than the “Utah Mormons” that he would join as he transitioned to adult life.

When he was in his first year of college, he got a job with the Challenger foundation as a guide with the wilderness program. He got involved with this program because his sister had gotten a job there, even though she had limited outdoor experience. The Challenger foundation program was started by Larry Dean Olsen and was advised by Larry Dean and Doug Nelson (BOSS). Later, they both pulled out due to concerns with some of the practices of the program. David learned to make bow drill and hand drill fires in the program. He felt that it had a positive impact on him, even though he did not agree with the way the kids were treated. The students were emotionally broken down at the beginning of the program and then built back up. Food and water were also occasionally withheld from them. David just felt that this wasn’t the right way to treat kids. When he left, he wrote a letter to the attorney general about the issues that he had seen in the

program, including psychological abuse and withholding food and water. He noted that at some point later, the program was shut down after a few of the kids died.

After this experience, David returned home, got engaged and focused on his education. David got a Masters in social work and worked in hospice care for 20 years, “divorcing” himself from nature for many years. David discovered later in life that he really needed nature connection in order to deal with some of the very stressful things that were happening in his life. A particularly stressful moment in his life was when David and his wife felt called to become a part of a fundamentalist religious organization. David felt a great deal of judgment by those around him. He turned back to nature to destress. At this time, his family started camping together more. When he would get grumpy, his wife would tell him that he needed some “David Time”, out in nature.

Six years ago, David moved back into practicing primitive skills. He started making bows and discovered that he really enjoys working with wood. He also enjoyed creating knives by flint knapping blades and creating handles from wood and pine pitch glue. David does not feel that one skill is better than another, and would learn them all if time allowed. When he saw an ad for Fire to Fire, a skills gathering in eastern Utah, he decided that it would be fun to attend and learn more skills. This was the third year of Fire to Fire. While he was drawn to the gatherings for the skills, what he really found was a community that accepted everyone for who they were. David has met and become friends with people who have very different beliefs from his Fundamentalist Mormon background. Scott Wright, a drummer and a friend, calls himself a “recovering Mormon” and is able to share his beliefs with David in a nonjudgmental way. When he and his wife came home with drums after their first Fire to Fire, it seemed counter to their culture and

their children accused them of hanging out with “hippies”. David admitted that some of them probably are hippies, but most are “just people who are really kind of back to nature and finding peace and being with each other and with their creator, however they define that creator.” David now attends an annual new years party held in St George by “Tin Cup Chase”, who invites people from all walks of life and all belief systems. David believes this is because organizers of the gatherings create this kind of culture, particularly Brad Wade of Fire to Fire.

Since attending Fire to Fire, David has also attended Rabbitstick. Rabbitstick seemed bigger to David, and more focused on the skills, but he still enjoyed meeting leaders in the primitive skills world, like Cody Lundin. He liked to fade into the background at Rabbitstick and listen to people talk. He compared these experiences to the Mountain Man Rendezvous and felt that the cultures are just different. Gatherings are about more than just the skills. David thinks that the organizers of gatherings really strive to help participants feel a connection to their ancestors.

Structural Description

David was a child when he discovered that the outdoors helped him to destress. He spent time in the Bob Marshall wilderness with the Boy Scouts, working his way up to Eagle Scout. His experience as a trail walker in a wilderness therapy program brought him even closer to nature. When David focused on other aspects of his life, it felt to him like he had “divorced” nature. When he came back to spending time in the outdoors, years later, it was to help him cope with major issues and events in his life. David thinks that there is more to nature connection that we just haven't discovered yet. He read a book, “The Hidden Life of Trees” that talked about how trees needed community to

flourish and how they felt pain and communicated with each other. This understanding of how all nature is connected is important to David. He thinks, “ There's so many spiritual occurrences that are happening within humans as well as within animals and plants. “

David reintroduced himself to primitive skills about 6 years ago, when he started making bows. David does not feel that one skill is better than another, though, and would learn them all if time allowed. David feels that the skills help awaken a part of us that “genetically that has been asleep for thousands or millions of years or something in us that comes alive, that really speaks to us and that we can connect with our ancestors in that way.” He really connected with drumming at his first skills gathering. While David can't pinpoint the connection that he feels through skills, he thinks that connections like this are very real and we just haven't figured out a way to scientifically explain them yet. David feels primitive skills gatherings are an environment where these connections are fostered.

David feels that the primitive skills gatherings are about more than just the skills. He has attended Mountain Man Rendezvous and the culture is just different. The people at the Rendezvous practice skills, but the environment is completely different. The gatherings are a place where everyone is accepted and where differences aren't focused on, but are still appreciated when they are brought to light. This is important to David because in his regular life, his beliefs are seen by some as questionable. This feeling of religious persecution has caused much of the stress in David's life that initially pushed him back to spending time in nature. David has met and become friends with people who have very different beliefs from his Fundamentalist Mormon background. Scott Wright, a drummer and a friend, calls himself a “recovering Mormon” and is able to share his

beliefs with David in a nonjudgmental way. This acceptance is very important to David and has helped him feel like he can be himself within this community, without judgement. He now attends an annual new years party held in St George by “Tin Cup Chase”, an instructor from Fire to Fire, who invites people from all walks of life and all belief systems. David believes this type of open community is created by organizers of the gatherings, particularly Brad Wade of Fire to Fire. Rabbitstick seemed bigger to David, and more focused on the skills, but he still enjoyed meeting leaders in the primitive skills world, like Cody Lundin. When he and his wife came home with drums after their first Fire to Fire, it seemed counter to their culture and their children accused them of hanging out with “hippies”. David admitted that some of them probably are hippies, but most are “just people who are really kind of back to nature and finding peace and being with each other and with their creator, however they define that creator.”

Hari

Textural Description

Hari’s primitive skills journey began when he was a child. His father was a biologist and would take him out into the field, even as a baby. His childhood was full of time outdoors, as he grew up in a time when kids played outdoors most of the time. He enjoyed reading books that were full of outdoor lore. When he was 14, he hunted and killed his first rabbit with a pellet gun. The experience of skinning and eating it “grossed him out” and he became a vegetarian for the next 10 years. During that time, Hari continued to spend a lot of time outdoors. He enjoyed backpacking and found comfort in “living simply”.

Hari enjoyed learning primitive skills and began making traditional bows. He initially learned from books like the Bowyer's Bible. In 1995, he opened up a traditional bow company and started to travel around and sell his bows and archery products. He travelled to bow shoots and barter faires selling his bows and made a living for a while. He first got into skills gatherings when he was a bowmaker. He was told about Rabbitstick, so he applied and became a bow making teacher. The bow making projects were really intense and took at least 4 solid days to complete. This meant that there were students at his door before he even had coffee in the morning and they stayed long after the dinner horn. Hari didn't like this feeling because he didn't have much time to enjoy the gatherings himself. He eventually burned out of teaching bow making. During this time, he also taught a primitive forge class, which inspired another teacher to study iron smelting in the ground.

Hari attended bow shoots and barter faires for many years. He also happened upon a knap in and that broadened his horizons about primitive skills. The barter faires are what got him into swords. He made a friend who worked security at one of the barter fairies (by accidentally setting up camp in the middle of the walkway and making this person upset initially). He helped his friend work security, which entailed dressing up in highland apparel and carrying around swords, making sure that people followed the rules. At his final bow shoot, he noticed that his wife was selling more baskets than he was able to sell bows. He felt burnt out and decided that it was time to move on. The passion of the the art that first inspired him became diminished by turning it into commerce. He returned to logging and got into politics. Hari stopped going to the gatherings as his life shifted to other things.

About five years ago, Hari started going back to primitive skills gatherings. He was brought back by Jean, a mutual connection to Patrick Farneman. He went to Between the Rivers and immediately felt like he was a part of a family. When he returned to the gatherings five years ago, he had a presentation that he called a “primitive Powerpoint”, images that he put on scrolls, which talked about the history of paddle craft. He enjoyed giving this presentation, even giving it to the Spokane Canoe and Kayak Club at one point. Hari also taught paddle making. He also began teaching the diddley bow, an instrument that he had seen in books and videos and fell in love with. This is a simple instrument that was initially made by the African American community early in our country’s history. He loves the diddley bow because it is simple, can be made out of everyday materials, and he really likes blues music. To Hari, the diddley bow feels like an idea that traveled with African people on slave ships, then became a reality with whatever materials they had available. Hari enjoys teaching diddley bow because it is fun, it pays his way, and it gets him to his primitive skills family. He enjoys teaching people how to make an instrument and enjoys the conversations they have while making these projects. He says, “The fact that we're making a diddley bow or a paddle or whatever we're doing is utterly secondary to the experience of communicating and hanging out “

Hari is fascinated by skills and tries to learn new skills whenever he can. Over the years, he’s learned about brain tanning, knapping and other core primitive skills. At Rabbitstick, this past year, he learned to make camouflage clothing using dye from rusty nails and leaves. However, when he tried to do it at home, the shirt that he used was mostly synthetic material and the dye didn’t take. To Hari, these types of learning

experiences are amazing because they are just practical knowledge that you never would have thought of. Hari enjoys taking classes from other people and was happy that he got to take Knot Allen's fire making class before Allen passed away. The cotton ball fire was particularly fascinating to Hari. This is a fire that you can make using cotton balls and ashes. It requires friction by rubbing it between two boards.

Structural Description

While Hari's story documented his life long experience with primitive skills, he focused on the skills gatherings as a unique community that has become central to his life, his extended family. He remarked, "I only teach different skills so I can get to go to a primitive skills gathering." Hari's journey of learning skills runs parallel to a social journey and a quest for community connection. He experienced different types of connection by reading books, attending bow hunts, barter faires and primitive skills gatherings. He first learned his skills though books like the bowyer's bible. These books gave him a sense of history and connection, but they were nothing like the connection he felt when spending time with other bowyers, holding their bows in his hand and talking about their craft. He felt that connection when he attended bow shoots. At barter faires, he connected with his roots and his passion for knife and sword making. He found comradery and connection in the experience of dressing up in highland apparel, while working security for these events. Hari feels that the community found at a primitive skills gathering is very different from other communities. This community is there to share knowledge and to give to others. Everyone is accepting, putting aside political and other differences and acting like "family". At these events, Hari felt a social connection that was safe and comfortable for people of many different backgrounds to share opinions

and ideas. He has witnessed intense conversations while students are participating in classes that he feels could not take place in another environment.

For Hari, the skills might be what drew everyone to the gathering, but the skills are secondary to the feeling of family and community found at a gathering. The culture is motivated by giving, not by taking, so it creates a unique experience, if only for a week. In Hari's mind, this is just enough time, so that "we don't discover what kind of assholes each one of us are, you know, fall apart." While he feels that the skills are secondary, it is also clear that he is enamored by the skills and by the knowledge that he can use to live a more simple life. Hari has spent his life learning for the sake of learning. He developed an interest in bow making, so he poured himself into bow making for a number of years. He burned out of it because it was his profession and the conversion of his passion for the art became just commerce and he could see that he wasn't making enough money. At one point, he found himself at a knap in, learning flintknapping skills from experts, just because it sounded interesting. He got into primitive forge because he met some friends at a barter faire who were into highland apparel and swords. He enjoyed learning about metal and decided to teach primitive forge at Rabbitstick not because he felt like he was an "expert", but because he wanted to tinker with it. This began a cycle with another student, who picked up his ideas and turned it into a life-long passion for primitive smelting. The way that this knowledge cycles through people, excites something inside of someone and continues to grow because of that person's passion is an important part of the skills gathering experience for Hari.

Music is an important part of the gatherings to Hari. He feels that this is a way that we can all communicate, even across cultures. The music is not commercial and is

often spontaneous, allowing people to gather without an agenda and participate in whatever way they can. He feels that the drum beats that happen at the gatherings give everyone a rhythm and make people feel comfortable, though he would prefer to have more variety in the drumming. Some people don't even mind sleeping by the drums, even though they sometimes drum late into the night. Hari feels that music can transcend our cultural differences and open us up to new experiences. Kids hear music and they are just naturally inclined to dance, even though they've never been taught how. Hari has moved from the intensity of teaching bow making into the joy of teaching diddley bow. To him, teaching people how to make an instrument that originally came over in the mind of a person on a slave ship signifies a unity that might not be politically correct in other contexts, but that is an important part of the essence of the gatherings. It shows that we all have origins in common and can put aside the divisiveness that we see in our current political climate. He says, "Regardless of our other stripes in the outer world, and that's an example of how the skills are a catalyst for something else that's completely different."

Karie

Textural Description

When Karie was a child, she spent a lot of time outdoors, building forts and playing camp, which was typical of kids in her area in the 1960s and 1970s. When she was 8, she read the book "My Side of the Mountain" and dreamed of being able to survive in the woods with only her knife. She learned to flyfish from her great grandfather and picked up "nuggets" of information about outdoor skills from her dad. Karie was passionate about the environment at a young age and even used to pick up

trash from the side of the street with her friends. She often felt “embarrassed” to be human, wishing she had been born another animal that was more in tune with the earth.

She was raised Catholic, but struggled to embrace that religion because she didn’t understand why her religion was supposed to have the only true God, when her people had persecuted the Indians and put them on reservations. She had heard in school about the different Native American gods and this internal conflict made her an atheist for a long time, until she had Native American friends and mentors who could share their understanding of spirituality.

Karie lived the life that she thought she was supposed to live, going to college and choosing to study computer programming over psychology. She chose programming because she felt that this would be a faster path to making more money, which she saw as the purpose of going to college. Even though Karie felt like the black sheep of her family and didn’t really understand the point of materialism and capitalism, she felt compelled to live that life. Karie worked in Seattle in the computer industry for quite some time. One day in 1996, she was sitting on the highway and the smog rolled in. She remembered a promise that she had made to herself as a child that she would never live somewhere that was polluted. At that point, Karie moved to the mountains in Sandpoint, Idaho.

About a year later, Karie went on a six-day hike with her dog. This hike turned into a sort of vision quest and at this time, Karie felt like her purpose in the world was revealed. Karie’s purpose is to protect the earth to the best of her ability and to teach others to do the same. After her hike, she gave up her computer job and began working in a wilderness therapy program. This was the beginning of her journey to share this knowledge with others. She began training in Reiki and energy healing a few years later.

In 2006, she met Digger, forming a pivotal relationship in her life. Digger lived in a yurt, lived primitively with hand-made furniture and minimal impact. This was an example to Karie of what she wanted to do, and inspired her to move into the woods, into a yurt without running water and electricity. He taught her how to make her first bow drill fire and how to brain tan. Digger also introduced her to primitive skills gatherings, and because of him, she went to her first Winter Count, then to Rabbitstick in 2007. Karie began teaching a year later, first leading a drum class and then teaching a variety of classes ranging from skills like hide tanning to classes on plants, like “All About Nettles”.

Karie has been teaching from that point and has been constantly working on developing her skills and her connection with nature. Around this time, she also began her shamanic training. In around 2012, She heard Grandmother Margaret speak and respond to a question about the “duality” of the physical and spirit world by declaring that the simple act of making it a duality is what created the division between people and the spirit world in the first place. Grandmother Margaret felt that we were all living in the spirit world, and when Karie heard this perspective it was both life changing and so clearly stated that it felt like a “duh” moment. After this, Karie went to her sit spot and saw nature with different eyes. Everything around her became a being and she was able to feel and interact with the spirit of those beings. In 2014, she studied plant spirit medicine to hone these skills. Plant spirit medicine allows her to help people heal spiritually by harnessing the power of the spirit of each plant.

Karie continues to live in Sandpoint, Idaho, in a yurt with no running water or power. She says that she will always live that way, even if she has a lot of money,

because it feels like the right way to live and because it sets the example for others. She has friends that live very regular lives who call her a “legacy or a legend” and think that what she does can be strange. But, when times are tough and the economy is bad, these same friends seem to be interested in learning about survival. These skills are difficult and her friends often don’t follow up, especially when the economy improves. She goes on backpacking trips with her friends and sees their disconnect from nature. Even though they are enjoying the outdoors, they will stop and eat a Cliff bar while Karie can graze from the plants along the way. Karie feels that even the simple act of foraging might help people connect with nature. The more they are able to connect, the more they have a chance to see that they can live a different, more connected lifestyle, and this is in line with Karie’s life purpose.

Structural Description

Karie’s story is a journey to rediscover her inner child and to heal the world through forgiveness and example. Her childhood memories of reading “My Side of the Mountain” and picking up trash with her friends were in sharp contrast to the life that she lived as a teenager and early adult. While she had many experiences that were foundational in her connection to nature, she had role models and experiences that pushed her towards a more culturally aligned life. As Karie talks about her current lifestyle, it is clear that she is honoring her inner child, “So now I live in the mountains, in the woods and kind of following that childhood instinct of knowing, like I already knew who I was when I was eight years old, and then life happened.” It has been a long journey for her to become the person who can survive in the woods with only their knife. Karie’s own

journey of disconnect with nature, and her work to become an energy healer, has helped her to develop compassion for those who are disconnected with nature.

Karie struggled with her feelings that most “two-legged people” were hurting the earth. As a child, she was embarrassed to be human and had to face these feelings as she worked to become an energy healer. She has never really understood the lifestyle led by the people around her, but she worked as a computer programmer for a while and lived that lifestyle. Separation from people was a theme for Karie, even in her family relationships and her friendships. Her mainstream friends don’t really understand her, though they think the stuff she does is cool, and she doesn’t really understand them. Regardless, she tries to help them to connect to the way that she is living so that they can access the primal side of themselves and see life from her perspective. When Karie found the skills gathering community, she found her “tribe” and wanted to be like the other people at the gatherings. Now, she feels her closest relationships are with other people who practice primitive skills. She gathers with five local friends each week to work on skills like brain tanning and sewing buckskin.

Karie separated from mainstream religion when she was a kid, finding more sense in the polytheistic views of Native Americans. However, she was an atheist for a long time, until she had Native American mentors. Her hike in 1997, which she refers to as a vision quest, helped her to change directions and pursue her true purpose in life. Then, in 2012, the teachings of Grandmother Margaret helped her to hone this direction and to begin studying plant spirit medicine. There is no division between spirituality and the natural world for Karie. She combines her teaching of spirituality with the teaching of primitive skills, feeling that the two are connected and should be connected for the

learner. Karie has always had a strong desire to heal people and considered becoming a psychologist when she was younger. Instead, she has become a Reiki and energy medicine practitioner, which fits more with her spiritual understanding of the world. She took a great interest in plants, learning herbology, herbal medicine and finally, plant spirit medicine. Plant spirit medicine is an entirely different level of interacting with plants, where the healer creates a spiritual connection to the plant and can help heal a person spiritually, as opposed to physically or emotionally.

Karie's disconnect from modern culture prompted her to begin living by example in 2007. After she discovered the primitive skills community and saw the way that Digger lived, she also wanted to set that example. Karie feels that most people are "unconsciously living in a way that is excessive" and that we are surrounded with "commercialism and materialism". She now lives in a yurt with no running water or power to show that there is a simpler way to live. She would not change the way she lives, regardless of how much money she has in the future. Karie watches her friends pull out Cliff bars on the side of the trail and is proud of the fact that she is able to graze on wild edible plants instead. She is happiest when she is working on skills with other from her "tribe" and feels that most people that she knows just can't slow down and take the time to learn the skills. Skills are a connection to both community and nature that Karie longed for as a child, so she is honoring that inner child by practicing them with her community.

Karie has always felt a strong tie to the environment and has seen it as her duty to protect the environment. As a child, she picked up garbage along the street and felt embarrassed to be part of the human race that was destroying the planet. She moved from

Seattle when she saw the pollution and smog set it for good, following a promise she had made to herself as a child. Karie could have gone the Greenpeace route of activism, but instead she has chosen what she calls “passive activism”, which is changing the hearts of people by helping them to reconnect with nature.

Karie loves teaching, even though she is an introvert and is very shy. Teaching is no longer stressful for her, she sees it as sharing her passion with others, so she just lets the information flow naturally. The exception to that is her “All About Nettles” class where she has so much information to share and she wants to get it right. She uses notes for that class to make sure that she shares all of the correct information. It is very important to Karie that she shares the spiritual side of the skills. She feels that lots of teachers miss this, though some teach about the history of the skills. Looking back to the idea that Grandmother Margaret shared, that we are all living in the spirit world, Karie does not see a separation between the skills and the spirituality of the skills, so she wants her students to understand this as well. One example she gives is of teaching brain tanning and “reminding people that that deer, that hide, they're working on used to be a deer and that deer had stories and it has a spirit.”

Karie believes that it is her purpose in the world to help people connect with the earth and that any experience might bring them closer if they can access and acknowledge their primal side. Even an act like foraging can awaken this part of them. Having both a physical and spiritual connection to a skill helps people to change their thinking and begin to access this part of them. She is frustrated with the passive interest that people have in learning skills. They will say that they want to learn and then not show up, or feel that they are “too hard”. Karie struggles with the idea that many people

are only interested in the skills when the economy is bad. When they are in “survival mode”, they say want to learn the skills, but they are no longer interested when things get better.

Rosemary

Individual Textural Description

Rosemary’s earliest experiences with nature connection were with her parents, walking in the woods with her mother and camping as a family. Her first experiences with primitive skills education were at an LDS summer camp as a child. She felt accepted at that camp and even though it was a religious camp, she did not feel that religion was emphasized. Rosemary remembers feeling that students of all religions and all economic backgrounds were welcome at her camp, “at this camp, we were all accepted”. She learned how to start fires with flint and steel, how to read maps, and how to find North by the stars. Rosemary spent time connecting with nature at her camp, “we went on five-mile hikes. We went swimming in the lake and pond. We learned how to start fires.”

When she was 17, she made a powerful nature connection while on a college trip in the back country of Yellowstone. She remembers “walking across the meadow, Bechler Meadows, as a thunderstorm rolled in, and just feeling that warm breeze on my face and realizing that I never wanted to be without this again.” Since then, she has returned to Yellowstone to recenter herself, almost every year for 45 years. Her experience in the back country helped her to realize that she could do hard things and provided her with “an emotional refuge” and “a safe environment where I felt accepted and I was able to learn”. Rosemary worked as a trail walker in a wilderness therapy

environment for many years and continues to bring therapy clients out into the wilderness to help them connect with nature, with themselves and with their community.

Rosemary homeschooled her children and they learned by going on field trips, participating in hands-on experiences and reading books in natural settings. Her own experiences with traditional education were very negative, though she was able to get through the system “on the honor roll”. She felt that all that “academic crap” was meaningless, but enjoyed reading in nature and read many books (Dickens, Tolkien, Bronte Sisters, Dostoyevsky) in a natural setting. She continued this practice with her son and with her granddaughter, finding in both cases that in nature, they could outperform what was expected of them in a traditional environment.

Rosemary began attending primitive skills gatherings 19 years ago, when her son convinced her to go to Rabbitstick, a gathering in Rexburg, Idaho. She has had experiences at these gatherings of personal transformation and has witnessed the transformation of others. Her granddaughter, diagnosed with RAD, learned to start a bow drill fire and shoot a bow at a primitive skills gathering and began to take an interest in Native American history. She then learned to flint knap and took an interest in geology. She witnessed another student with autism who was able to connect to the people around her through pottery. At primitive skills gatherings, ““Everybody finds a skill, everybody finds something they connect to and I connected to felting.” Felting helped Rosemary feel connected to her own culture and to the culture of others, notably her friend who is Native American and helped her to understand the culture around raising her Navajo Churro sheep. Almost every year, she shares one of her sheep with a class at Rabbitstick so that they can learn about processing the animal. Rosemary does not eat meat, but

chooses to eat the meat of this animal “to symbolize, I can always make that choice just as that animal makes that choice to give itself to me.” In addition to teaching felting, Rosemary also helps students to connect to the process of photosynthesis by teaching about tree tapping and maple syrup.

Attending primitive skills gatherings set Rosemary and her husband on a life changing path. They sold their house in town and bought 16 acres where they raise sheep and share skills with others. They now live on a bus as they build their house so that they can stay out of debt. Rosemary and her husband raise sheep, keep bees and are able to harvest necessary food and materials from their 16 acre property. She feels empowered and able to live off her own land, knowing that she can find food and make items necessary to survival.

Rosemary goes out into the community and teaches skills, like the bow drill, to women in an effort to empower them. She feels that skills help everyone to connect across cultures and age groups. She has come full circle to sharing these skills at an LDS camp that has similar values and structure to the one she attended as a child. She teaches skills like collecting water and starting fires with bow drill and flint and steel. She continues to take women hiking in the back country, in an effort to empower them and help them to make the same connections that have guided her.

Individual Structural Description

Rosemary’s first experiences with nature and community connectedness revolve around her feelings of safety. As a child, she found emotional safety through walks in the woods with her mother, who struggled as a parent in other contexts. Rosemary found safety from school through reading books in nature, and found a safe community when

she attended a girls' camp that focused on outdoor activities. As a teenager, she found safety within herself through personal empowerment, as she hiked the backcountry of Yellowstone. Her experience in the back country helped her to realize that she could “do hard things” and provided her with “an emotional refuge” and “a safe environment where I felt accepted and I was able to learn”. She now lives off her own land and feels that this is an important step in her journey of personal empowerment.

Rosemary shares this empowerment by taking women into the backcountry (often mothers and daughters), teaching them basic survival skills and helping them to see the strength in each other and in themselves. She also worked as a wilderness therapy guide, sharing her feeling of safety with students who were struggling in the outside world. In these experiences, there was a strong correlation between seeing the beauty outside and finding the personal power within these students. Primitive skills were important in these environments, but they were not as important to Rosemary as the simple power of the backcountry. It wasn't until she began to attend the Rabbitstick Primitive Skills gathering in 2001 that she saw the ways that primitive skills education could provide people with the feelings of safety and belonging similar to what she found in the backcountry.

Equality is important to Rosemary and she has experienced similar feelings of equality in summer camps, the back country and at primitive skills camps. To Rosemary, equality is found by disregarding socio-economic status, religion, race, and gender and also by minimizing what would be considered to be disabilities in the outside world. The bow drill provides an important avenue for learners to feel equal and safe. Most people have never been exposed to the bow drill, so everyone begins on an equal footing when they first try to make a fire.

In Rosemary's experience, primitive skills gatherings create space for people to feel connected to nature and to community. These gatherings have a culture of gratitude where people can learn to love themselves and feel loved by those around them. She has had experiences with participants who have autism, conduct disorder and RAD (Reactive Attachment Disorder) feeling safe to learn and teach in these environments. She identifies that trust and acceptance are characteristics of these events and these characteristics influence the interactions of people who attend. Trust, for Rosemary stems from not feeling judged, from feeling "believed" and from feeling trusted. It's not just the skills that Rosemary tries to bring to the outside world. Through the teaching of the skills (particularly bow drill), she hopes to create a space where people can trust, feel accepted and are empowered in other communities, like a girls camp where she teaches and to the women in her local community.

Connection to food is a powerful nature connection for Rosemary. She feels that as an American culture, we no longer focus on having the skills to grow and harvest our food, we just focus on having the money to buy it. In her experience, this leads people to feel afraid when we have disasters because they don't know how to provide for their basic needs. Primitive skills like animal processing, plant identification, foraging and food preparation help students to understand the sacrifice that other animals make for us and the effort that it takes to gather the food that can be found in the grocery store. This helps to ground students of all ages and removes the barriers between people and their food.

A final theme for Rosemary was the value of different cultures. Rosemary feels that the primitive skills community embraces other cultures and helps people to

appreciate what each culture has to offer. Instead of trying to make everyone the same, this community highlights what each culture has to offer. For example, drum circles are “all about matching that heart rhythm” and Rosemary acknowledges that they come from a different culture than hers and finds value in learning the skills of that culture. Rosemary feels that skills help everyone to connect across cultures and age groups. Children who experience this type of learning community see that it is not acceptable to marginalize a culture. In this community, the connections are not necessarily to our present day cultures, but to the past, origins and heritage of the culture.

Scott

Individual Textural Description

Scott began a spiritual rebirth in 2008. He was divorced in 2002 and struggled with addiction and a selfish lifestyle up to this point. In 2008, he looked back to the religion that he was raised in to try to find answers. The Mormon Church shaped his core belief system and had given him his structural understanding of God and spirituality. He grew up in the church and at one point went on a mission to Brazil. The church was not able to give Scott the answers he was looking for, so in December of 2008, he left the church and began looking for answers elsewhere. Scott met his wife during this time, bought a house with a garden, following his intuition that nature would help heal him, and began down a path of healing and inner spirituality. This path took him to Peru, where he participated in an Ayahuasca ceremony and used plant medicine to look deep inside himself and face his demons. Scott used a scene from Star Wars, where Luke goes into the cave and confronts his fear, as an analogy for his experience in part of this

Ayahuasca ceremony. While he does not feel that it is for everyone, plant medicine was an important part of his journey in spirituality and healing.

Rabbitstick, in 2011, was Scott's first primitive skills gathering. He joined this gathering because his brother had been asking him to come for a while and he decided to give it a shot. Scott came up for Mask Night, a Thursday night event where a group drums and others dance around the fire. Scott initially felt embarrassed being a part of the group. He had a frame drum with a drum stick and felt like he didn't know what he was doing. Scott didn't have a musical background at this point. As the night went on, he saw others in the group just "expressing" themselves, and he grew more and more comfortable. By the end of the night, he had broken his drumstick because he was so engaged in the drumming. Ift felt primal, like something that people were just supposed to do, something "in our DNA".

Scott then experienced drumming again at Winter Count. His mentor Andrew Dahl-Bredine taught him the basics of drumming and traded him a Djembe for an elk hide. Andrew and Scott had both spent time in Brazil, so they were able to bond on that and Andrew's Brazilian Samba rhythms made Scott feel at home and comfortable. Scott had another experience where he felt like he was creating a rhythm and everyone was drumming around him. He realized that drumming brought people together because everyone added their own piece, creating the whole experience.

Later, Scott met Brad Wade while camping at Rabbitstick. He chose a different campsite than he had in the past and Brad happened to be camping next to him. Scott had a connection with sunflowers. He bought a house in 2010 with a large garden space, feeling that this would help him heal, and he planted a sunflower circle. The circle, to

him, was an important symbol, following the medicine wheel that he had learned about at skills gatherings, and also a similar symbol found in many aboriginal cultures. The sunflower was so central to Scott's healing that he and his wife wrote an 8-part curriculum around it and Scott wrote a children's book about the sunflower circle. When he went to this gathering, he was planning to teach others about the symbolism and importance of his sunflowers. Brad, camped next to him, was coincidentally going to teach a class about roasting sunflower seeds in a solar oven. They combined classes and became friends.

At Winter Count in 2014, Scott and Brad both had an experience with a teacher named Poranguí. He was Brazilian and Mexican, a musician and a drummer. One evening, Scott and Brad found themselves at his camp. There was a group playing instruments and drumming. The drumming was intense and it all just fit together. Scott remembered a woman named Starlight singing, and her voice sounded like an angel. After this point, Scott and Brad began talking about the Fire to Fire gathering, heavily influenced by the drumming and wanting to bring the music and the feeling of togetherness to others. Scott and Brad had other experiences while playing the Fire to Fire gathering that helped Scott to realize that nature gives out signs constantly and to make the shift towards starting to acknowledge and listen to these signs.

Scott began working with Hugh Vail a couple of years ago after being introduced through a mutual friend. Hugh teaches a class using wild mustangs called a "mustang laydown" as a metaphor for a person's inner struggle and their personal empowerment. The mustang is an easy and accessible way to see this struggle, as they live in fight or flight mode. Scott and Hugh had similar life struggles and a similar perspective on

healing and spirituality. They began offering healing sessions with the lay down, then a drum circle following. These sessions were just too long, so they began offering them on different days. In these shortened sessions, Scott is teaching drumming and leading a drum circle, then Scott and others are “drumming on” people, giving them a sound bath with the drums. This is an ancient practice, meant to help get things moving through the body and to promote healing.

Structural Description

Scott’s life is rooted in spirituality, but his definition of spirituality radically changed when he had a spiritual awakening in 2008. His search for external answers and truth turned inward and he began to find spirituality in nature, meditation and drumming. He feels that the connectedness that we are all looking for is actually present all of the time, through a connective energy field, but we have been taught to be individuals so we just can't feel it anymore. Primitive skills are a way of bringing us back to that connection. Plant medicine was an important part of his journey and while he stresses that it is not for everyone, those statements seemed to come from a worry about cultural taboos, as he talked about these ceremonies as a part of our ancient heritage. Scott feels that many of the tribal and ancient ways of doing things are just in our DNA, so they make us feel connected when we experience them. He had this connection initially with sunflowers, then with drumming. Scott has strong emotional ties to South America. He went through his Ayahuasca ceremony in Peru and bonded with two of his mentors because of a connection to Brazil.

Healing is also a central focus for Scott. Scott struggled with addiction and trauma from a difficult divorce. In 2008, Scott had a “spiritual reset” and looked to organized religion for answers but found that lacking. He has been on a healing journey since that point and has changed his profession in order to help others heal. He does not draw a distinction between spirituality and healing, but talks about healing more as looking inward and spirituality more as connecting with nature and others. However, Scott has had a few healing experiences with drumming that helped him feel more connected to what is around him, so there is some overlap between the two (external connection helps internal reflection?). Sound and vibration are very important parts of healing, though Scott feels that the goal is presence, which can be found through multiple paths. He helps people to heal by drumming on them, using vibrations to help their bodies process and become un “stuck”. Scott feels that the people who go to gatherings have acknowledged the need for a deeper connection and are better suited to lead others to this connection.

Scott does not define the differences in any of the classes or skills, he views them all as a way to look inward. Scott sees skills as meditative and reflective. He teaches classes on drum making and playing, but also helps people to heal with sound baths and other transformative experiences. Even the act of carving, in Scott’s mind, can create a meditative state and help someone to heal. His important relationships revolve around skills. He met Hugh through a mutual friend, then experienced the metaphor that Hugh taught using his “Mustang Laydowns”. He and Hugh now work together, sharing their skills and helping participants to identify their personal struggles and heal from them. Scott feels that drumming requires a person to be more vulnerable in order to participate, whereas the mustang laydowns require less participation and are more accessible.

Scott talked extensively about the people who mentored him and the people around him who he is currently working with. It was important to him to talk about his community and share those relationships. Connection is important to Scott, as he talked about his years of disconnect, between 2002 and 2008 as finding out “who I wasn’t”, and his journey forward was about connections with specific people. Scott is drawn to South America, as well as to mentors who came from this area or were also drawn to it. He listed many mentors, some who were personal mentors and some who were leaders in the primitive skills movement and wanted to make sure that he acknowledged all of the elders.

Scott feels that life should be lived in a state of flow, instead of in the goal oriented, structured ways of Western culture. He has had many experiences where the answers just came to him when he allowed himself to let go. The flow state can be found through doing anything creative and this is why he feels that practicing skills can connect people with nature and with themselves. Sitting in nature, carving a stick or drumming can all produce a similar state of presence, which can help a person see life without expectation and become a happier person.

Zac

Individual Textural Description

Zac first experienced a deep connection with nature when he was a child and he spent time with his father in the outdoors. His mother was not around and Zac felt that nature took over the job of providing him with nurture. When he was a teenager he read an article about Tom Brown in Backpacker magazine. He can’t recall what the article was about, but it stuck in his mind that Tom Brown was the survival guy. When he was 24 or

25, he found Tom's books and began to read them. The books not only talked about skills, they talked about the spirituality behind nature connection. Zac was so moved by these books that he went and took classes from Tom Brown. Later, he learned many of his skills (flint knapping, pottery, plants, the edible plants and "things of that sort") from John Olson. John had a similar spiritual focus and his book "Spiritual Awakenings" helped Zac to learn more about meditation and living in the moment.

Zac first started drumming because his son wanted to drum. At first he was not very interested, but when he met DJibril, this changed. DJibril spoke about drumming like it was a way to create community and to bond with the people around you. Anyone could learn how to drum, so it was accessible to anyone who wanted to try. When drumming with DJibril, Zac felt that he was able to heal and become a part of the community. This was especially important because he was an introvert and drumming was a way to communicate with others on a deeper level, without the need for words.

Individual Structural Description

Zac is driven by a desire for connection to other people and to the natural world. He sees himself as a "creator", made in the image of God, the creator, who shows himself in "animals, plants, humans, the rocks". Zac states "when you create something, I believe you reveal something about yourself" and that if we can slow down and really be aware of those things, we can feel the connectedness. Zac's life goal has been to feel that connectedness to and awareness of all things. He initially learned from Tom Brown's books and these resonated deeply with him because Tom Brown talks about the spirituality in our connection to nature. This, coupled with his belief that we are all

creators, led him to learn more specific skills from John Olson, who also approached these skills in a spiritual way.

As Zac is an introvert, and due to his childhood experiences of family, his connection with community did not come easily. He found that drumming provided him with a path to community connectedness that he could not get in other settings. He was introduced to this idea by a local (Utah) friend named DJibril, who is originally from Senegal. Jibril frames drumming as a way to connect with people and heal each other. This feels to Zac more like the way indigenous cultures viewed community. Instead of trying to be individualistic and “right” people would try to be a part of their community. In our culture, Zac feels “that community is where we're really broken and we really need each other.” When you drum, everyone has to work together and that helps them to become a community.

Zac struggles with the individualism promoted by our culture. He feels that indigenous cultures did not promote individualism and also helped people to find a balance between their light and dark sides. Zac feels like he is being the best version of himself when he can connect spirituality with his skills and every day actions. The connection between primitive skills and spirituality is the most important thing to Zac. He sees the skills as part of a path to further connect with nature and the spiritual world. Zac does not see a difference between any of the skills, in that they are all mimicking the creator, making and connecting with spirituality. Drumming is a skill that Zac feels anyone can learn, so the spirituality and the community formed by drumming accessible to anyone.

Appendix B: Letter to Co-researchers

Dear _____,

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation research on the experience of nature and community connectedness in primitive skills education. I appreciate your potential involvement in discovering the essence of this experience. The purpose of this letter is to share the nature of your involvement as a co-researcher and to ask you to sign the included informed consent form. Primitive Skills Education is clearly a very powerful way of creating connection in students, but surprisingly, very little academic research has been done on the topic. This is a unique situation, because academic research needs a proper foundation to build on. I would like to discuss primitive skills education with you, the expert “experiencer”, so that together we can present a clear understanding of Primitive Skills Education and the Nature and Community connectiveness that it can create. Once this understanding is established, we can open the doors for future research on Primitive Skills Education.

I would like for you to tell me the story of your journey with both Primitive Skills Education and your feeling of nature and community connectedness. In your initial 60 to 1 hour interview, I would like to hear about past experiences that stand out in your mind as creating that feeling of connectedness. I would also like to hear about the experiences that helped you to grow in that feeling of connectedness and learn more about the path that you followed. And finally, I would like to hear about how this feeling has changed your relationship with your community and with the environment. In this storytelling process, I am looking for accurate accounts, feelings and specific details, positive and negative.

In addition to our initial interview, I will be contacting you to verify your information and to follow up on questions that I might have. If needed, I may attempt to have focus group discussion with other co-researchers at Rabbitstick or using video conferencing software. In my research, you will only be identified by your first name and will not be tied to a specific location. However, as the primitive skills community is small, it is very likely that you can be identified simply by knowing your first name and the primitive skills you practice, so I cannot guarantee your anonymity. You are able to drop out of this research project at any. If you have any questions about my project, you can always contact me: Email: anne.graham@umontana.edu Phone: 406-214-6879.

Please sign the attached Informed Consent Form and return it to me. We can then schedule a good time to meet over the phone, computer or in person.

Thanks,
Annie Graham

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Date:

Subject Code:

Opening Statements:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. There are a few things that I would like to make sure you understand before we get started.

- I will be asking you some general questions and writing notes as we proceed.
- All information from this interview will be confidential. That is, you will not be identified by name or location in this study or in any report from this study.
- You will only be identified as “P” in these notes. A confidential subject code will be used to identify you for the follow up interview and connect your interview with your survey information.
- No direct quotes from you will be used in the study without your prior permission. When quoted your identity and location will remain confidential.
- You may stop this interview at any time without any negative consequences.
- The questions I am asking are about your personal experiences with Primitive Skills Education.

Please be assured that there are no correct answers to the questions that I will be asking. What is important, are your thoughts, feelings and experiences. The intent of this interview is to gather your thoughts, feelings, and experiences, not to make judgments on your responses.

Interview Guide:

The interviewer will participate in a long format interview with the participant. Interview questions will be used to prompt participants when necessary, but the same questions may not be asked to every participant. Questions may include:

1. Can you tell me the story of how you became a teacher of these skills?
2. Describe one of your earliest experiences that you think put you on this path.
3. What did you do to continue your primitive skills education from those early experiences?
4. Do you feel like your relationship with the environment has changed in any way due to your primitive skills education? Explain.
5. Do you feel like your relationship with others, particularly in the primitive skills community, has changed as you have learned and taught these skills?